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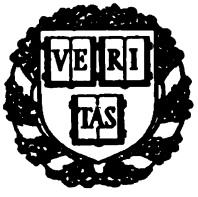

FROM THE BEQUEST OF
FRANCIS BROWN HAYES
Class of 1839
OF LEXINGTON, MASSACHUSETTS

THE WATER OF THE WONDROUS ISLES

THE WATER OF THE WONDROUS ISLES BY WILLIAM MORRIS

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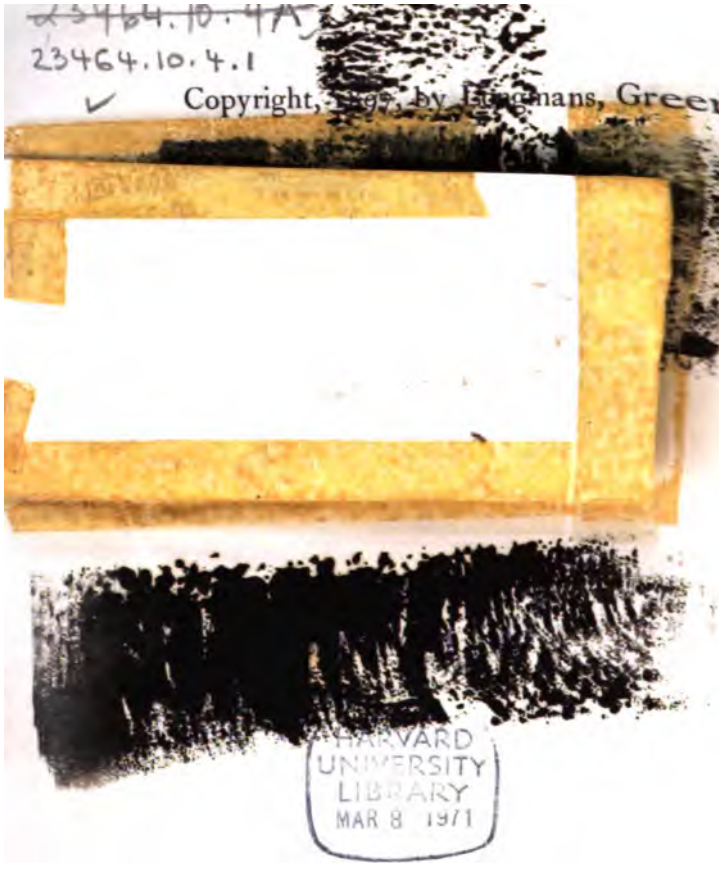

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CONTENTS

The First Part: Of the House of Captivity

		PAGE
Chap. I.	Catch at Utterbay	1
II.	Now shall be told of the House by the Waterside	8
III.	Of Skin-changing	10
IV.	Of the Waxing of the Stolen Child	12
V.	Of Birdalone, and how she is grown into Maidenhood	15
VI.	Herein is told of Birdalone's Raiment	18
VII.	Birdalone hath an Adventure in the Wood	22
VIII.	Of Birdalone and the Witch-wife	30
IX.	Of Birdalone's Swimming	33
X.	Birdalone comes on New Tidings	36
XI.	Of Birdalone's Guilt and the Chastisement	39
XII.	The Words of the Witch-wife to Birdalone	43
XIII.	Birdalone meeteth the Wood-woman again	46
XIV.	Of Birdalone's Fishing	51
XV.	Birdalone weareth her Serpent-ring	54
XVI.	Birdalone meeteth Habundia again; and learneth her First Wisdom of her	59
XVII.	The Passing of the Year into Winter	62
XVIII.	Of Springtide and the Mind of Birdalone	65
XIX.	They bid Farewell, Birdalone and the Wood-mother	68
XX.	Of Birdalone and the Sending Boat	70

The Second Part: Of the Wondrous Isles

Chap. I.	The First Isle	75
II.	Birdalone falleth in with New Friends	77
III.	Birdalone is brought before the Witch-wife's Sister	82
IV.	Of the Witch's Prison in the Wailing-tower	85

PAGE

Chap. V. *They feast in the Witch's Prison* 89
VI. *Atra tells of how they three came unto the Isle of Increase Unsought* 97
VII. *The three Damsels take Birdalone out of the Witch's Prison* 109
VIII. *In what Wise Birdalone was clad, and how she went her Ways from the Isle of Increase Unsought* 112
IX. *How Birdalone came to the Isle of the Young and the Old* 117
X. *Birdalone comes to the Isle of the Queens* . . . 131
XI. *And now she comes to the Isle of the Kings* . . 136
XII. *Of Birdalone, how she came unto the Isle of Nothing* 141

The Third Part: Of the Castle of the Quest

Chap. I. *Birdalone comes to the Castle of the Quest* . . 146
II. *Of Birdalone, and how she rested the Night through in a Bower without the Castle of the Quest* 152
III. *How Birdalone dight her for meeting the Champions of the Quest* 157
IV. *And now she meets the Champions* 160
V. *Birdalone has True Tokens from the Champions of the Quest* 167
VI. *How the Champions would do Birdalone to be clad anew in the Castle of the Quest* . . . 176
VII. *Of Birdalone, how she told the Champions all her Tale* 180
VIII. *In the Meanwhile of the Departing of the Champions, they would pleasure Birdalone with Feats of Arms and Games of Prowess* . . 184
IX. *Birdalone cometh before the Champions in her New Array* 186
X. *The Champions go their Ways in the Sending Boat* 190

The Fourth Part: Of the Days of Abiding

		PAGE
Chap. I.	Of Birdalone's Grief; and of Leonard the Chaplain	194
II.	Birdalone learneth Lore of the Priest. Ten Days of Waiting wear	197
III.	Now would Birdalone ride abroad	201
IV.	Of Birdalone's Faring abroad	205
V.	Sir Aymeris sheweth Birdalone the Mountains afar off	208
VI.	Birdalone heareth tell Tales of the Black Valley of the Greywethers	213
VII.	Birdalone beguileth the Priest to help her to Outgoing	216
VIII.	Birdalone fares on her Adventure	220
IX.	Birdalone comes to the Black Valley	224
X.	How Birdalone fell in with a Man in the Black Valley of the Greywethers	227
XI.	Birdalone is led up the Black Valley	231
XII.	How those Twain get them from out of the Black Valley of the Greywethers	235
XIII.	Now they rest for the Night in the Strait Pass	243
XIV.	The Black Knight tells the Truth of Himself	245
XV.	The Black Knight brings Birdalone to the Bower in the Dale	250
XVI.	Yet a Day and a Night they tarry in the Dale	255

The Fifth Part: The Tale of the Quest's Ending

Chap. I.	Of Sir Leonard's Trouble and the Coming of the Quest	263
II.	Now ask they of Birdalone, and Sir Leonard speaks	268
III.	How they follow the Slot of Birdalone and the Black Knight	271
IV.	Of the Slaying of Friend and Foe	276
V.	They come home to the Castle of the Quest	283

PAGE

Chap. VI. *Of the Talk betwixt Birdalone and Viridis* . 285
VII. *Birdalone telleth the Tale of her Wandering up the Valley of the Greywethers* 289
VIII. *Atra and Birdalone talk together while the Lords sit at the Murder-council* . . 305
IX. *Hugh tells the Story of the Quest's Ending* . 309
X. *How it fared with the Three Ladies after the Escape of Birdalone* 340
XI. *Birdalone and the Black Squire talk together in the Hall of the Castle* 350
XII. *The Knights and their Fellows betake them to the Assaulting of the Red Hold* . . . 355
XIII. *Birdalone bethinks her to fulfil the Promise made unto Atra* 358
XIV. *Birdalone leaves the Castle of the Quest* . . 364

The Sixth Part: The Days of Absence

Chap. I. *Birdalone rides to Greenford and there takes Leave of Arnold and his Men* . . . 366
II. *Of Birdalone and her Fellowship, their Faring over the Downland* 372
III. *They come to the City of the Five Crafts, and Birdalone meets with the Poor-wife* . . 374
IV. *Of the Love of Gerard's Sons and of Jacobus for Birdalone* 385
V. *Of the death of Audrey, Mother to Birdalone. She is warned in a Dream to seek the Black Squire, and is minded to depart the City of the Five Crafts, and seek again the Castle of the Quest* 389
VI. *Of the Sundering of Birdalone from Gerard and his Sons* 396
VII. *Birdalone cometh to Greenford, and hears of the Wasting of the Castle of the Quest* . 401
VIII. *Birdalone cometh to the Castle of the Quest, heareth the Tale thereof from Leonard, and departeth thence by the Sending Boat* 406

PAGE

Chap. IX. *Birdalone findeth the Isle of Nothing greatly bettered, and is kindly entreated there* . 413
X. *Of Birdalone's Flitting from the Isle of Nothing* 420
XI. *Coming to the Isle of Kings, Birdalone findeth there a Score and Two of Fair Damsels who would fain have her Company* . . 422
XII. *Birdalone cometh again to the Isle of Queens, and findeth a Perilous Adventure therein* 427
XIII. *Coming to the Isle of the Young and the Old, Birdalone findeth it peopled with Children* 438
XIV. *The Sending Boat disappeareth from the Isle of Increase Unsought, and Birdalone seeketh to escape thence by Swimming* . . 442
XV. *Birdalone lacketh little of Drowning, but cometh latterly to the Green Eyot* . . 446
XVI. *Birdalone findeth her Witch-mistress dead* . 449
XVII. *Birdalone layeth to Earth the Body of the Witch, and findeth the Sending Boat broken up* 454
XVIII. *The Wood-mother cometh to Birdalone and heareth her Story* 458
XIX. *Habundia hideth Birdalone's Nakedness with Faery Raiment* 463
XX. *Birdalone telleth Habundia of her Love for Arthur, and getteth from her Promise of Help therein* 465
XXI. *How the Wood-wife entered the Cot, and a Wonder that befell thereon* 468
XXII. *Birdalone wendeth the Wildwood in Fellowship with Habundia* 472
XXIII. *The Wood-wife bringeth Birdalone to the Sight of Arthur in the Wildwood* . . 475
XXIV. *The Wood-mother changeth her Form to that of a Woman stricken in Years* . . . 485
XXV. *The Wood-wife healeth and tendeth the Black Squire* 489

PAGE

Chap. XXVI. *The Black Squire telleth the Wood-wife of his Doings since Birdalone went from the Castle of the Quest* 493
XXVII. *Sir Arthur cometh to the House under the Wood* 500
XXVIII. *Fair Days in the House of Love* . . . 503
XXIX. *Those Twain will seek the Wisdom of the Wood-wife* 505
XXX. *They have Speech with Habundia concerning the Green Knight and his Fellows* 509
XXXI. *Habundia cometh with Tidings of those Dear Friends* 512
XXXII. *Of the Fight in the Forest and the Rescue of those Friends from the Men of the Red Company* 518
XXXIII. *Viridis telleth the Tale of their Seeking* . 525

The Seventh Part: The Days of Returning

Chap. I. *Sir Hugh asketh Birdalone where she would have the Abode of their Fellowship to be* . 533
II. *Birdalone taketh Counsel with her Wood-mother concerning the Matter of Sir Hugh* . . . 537
III. *Of the Journeying through the Forest of Evilshaw unto the Town of Utterbay* . . . 541
IV. *Of the Abiding in Utterbay in Love and Contentment* 550

THE WATER OF THE WONDROUS ISLES. THE FIRST PART: OF THE HOUSE OF CAPTIVITY.

CHAPTER I. CATCH AT UTTERHAY.

WHILOM, as tells the tale, was a walled cheaping-town hight Utterhay, which was builded in a bight of the land a little off the great highway which went from over the mountains to the sea.

The said town was hard on the borders of a wood, which men held to be mighty great, or maybe measureless; though few indeed had entered it, and they that had, brought back tales wild and confused thereof.

Therein was neither highway nor byway, nor wood-reeve nor way-warden; never came chapman thence into Utterhay; no man of Utterhay was so poor or so bold that he durst raise the hunt therein; no outlaw durst flee thereto; no man of God had such trust in the saints that he durst build him a cell in that wood.

For all men deemed it more than perilous; and some said that there walked the worst of the dead; othersome that the Goddesses of the Gentiles haunted there; others again that it was the faery rather, but they full of malice and guile. But most commonly it was deemed that the devils swarmed amidst of its thickets, and that whereso-ever a man sought to, who was once environed by

it, ever it was the Gate of Hell whereto he came. And the said wood was called Evilshaw.

Nevertheless the cheaping-town throve not ill; for whatso evil things haunted Evilshaw, never came they into Utterhay in such guise that men knew them, neither wotted they of any hurt that they had of the Devils of Evilshaw.

Now in the said cheaping-town, on a day, it was market and high noon, and in the market-place was much people thronging; and amidst of them went a woman, tall, and strong of aspect, of some thirty winters by seeming, black-haired, hook-nosed and hawk-eyed, not so fair to look on as masterful and proud. She led a great grey ass betwixt two panniers, wherein she laded her marketings. But now she had done her chaffer, and was looking about her as if to note the folk for her disport; but when she came across a child, whether it were borne in arms or led by its kinswomen, or were going alone, as were some, she seemed more heedful of it, and eyed it more closely than aught else.

So she strolled about till she was come to the outskirts of the throng, and there she happened on a babe of some two winters, which was crawling about on its hands and knees, with scarce a rag upon its little body. She watched it, and looked whereto it was going, and saw a woman sitting on a stone, with none anigh her, her face bowed over her knees as if she were weary or sorry. Unto her crept the little one, murmuring and merry, and put its arms about the woman's legs, and buried its face in the folds of her gown:

[redacted]

a while and hearken good tidings. And she put her hand to her girdle-pouch, and drew thereout a good golden piece, a noble, and said: When I am sitting down in thine house thou wilt have earned this, and when I take my soles out thereof there will be three more of like countenance, if I be content with thee meanwhile.

The woman looked on the gold, and tears came into her eyes; but she laughed and said: House-room may I give thee for an hour truly, and therewithal water of the well, and a mouse's meal of bread. If thou deem that worth three nobles, how may I say thee nay, when they may save the life of my little one. But what else wouldst thou of me? Little enough, said the alien; so lead me straight to thine house.

So went they forth of the market-place, and the woman led them, the alien and the ass, out of the street through the west gate of Utterhay, that, to wit, which looked on Evilshaw, and so into a scattering street without the wall, the end of which neared a corner of the wood aforesaid: the houses there were nought so evil of fashion, but whereas they were so nigh unto the Devil's Park, rich men might no longer away with them, and they were become wares for poor folk.

Now the townswoman laid her hand on the latch of the door that was hers, and threw the door open; then she put forth her palm to the other, and said: Wilt thou give me the first gold now, since rest is made sure for thee, as long as thou wilt? The ass-leader put it into her hand, and she took it and

laid it on her baby's cheek, and then kissed both gold and child together; then she turned to the alien and said: As for thy way-beast, I have nought for him, neither hay nor corn: thou wert best to leave him in the street. The stranger nodded a yea-say, and the three went in together, the mother, the child, and the alien.

Not right small was the chamber; but there was little therein; one stool to wit, a yew-chair, a little table, and a coffer: there was no fire on the hearth, nought save white ashes of small wood; but it was June, so that was of no account.

The guest sat down in the yew-chair, and the poor-wife laid her child down gently on the floor and came and stood before the stranger, as if abiding her bidding.

Spake the alien: Nought so uncomely or strait is thy chamber; and thy child, which I see is a woman, and therefore belike shall long abide with thee, is lovely of shape, and fair of flesh. Now also thou shalt have better days, as I deem, and I pray them on thine head.

She spake in a kind wheedling voice, and the poor-wife's face grew softer, and presently tears fell down on to the table from her, but she spake no word. The guest now drew forth, not three nobles, but four, and laid them on the table, and said: Lo, my friend, the three nobles which I behight thee! now are they thine; but this other thou shalt take and spend for me. Go up into the town, and buy for me white bread of the best; and right good flesh, or poulaine if it may be, already cooked

and dight; and, withal, the best wine that thou mayst get, and sweetmeats for thy baby; and when thou comest back, we will sit together and dine here. And thereafter, when we be full of meat and drink, we shall devise something more for thy good speed.

The woman knelt before her weeping, but might speak no word because of the fullness of her heart. She kissed the guest's hands, and took the money, and then arose and caught up her child, and kissed her bare flesh eagerly many times, and then hastened out of the house and up the street and through the gate; and the guest sat hearkening to the sound of her footsteps till it died out, and there was nought to be heard save the far-off murmur of the market, and the chirrup of the little one on the floor.

Then arose the guest and took up the child from the floor, who kicked and screamed, and craved her mother as her broken speech might; but the alien spake softly to her, and said: Hush, dear one, and be good, and we will go and find her; and she gave her therewith a sugar-plum from out of her scrip. Then she came out of doors, and spake sweetly to the little one: See now this pretty way-beast. We will ride merrily on him to find thy mother.

Then she laid the child in the pannier with a soft cushion under, and a silk cloth over her, so that she lay there happily. Then she took her ass's rein and went her ways over the waste toward Evil-shaw; for, as ye may deem, where the houses and the street ended, the beaten way ended also.

Quietly and speedily she went, and met but three

men on the way; and when these saw her, and that she was making for Evilshaw, they turned their heads away, each one, and blessed themselves, and went past swiftly. Not one sought to stay her, or held any converse with her, and no foot she heard following after her. So in scarce more than the saying of a low mass she was in amongst the trees, with her ass and her wares and her prey.

No stay she made there, but held forward at her best before the night should fall upon her. And whatsoever might be told concerning the creatures that other folk had met in Evilshaw, of her it must needs be said that therein she happened on nought worser than herself.

CHAPTER II. NOW SHALL BE TOLD OF THE HOUSE BY THE WATER-SIDE.

FOUR days they wended the wood, and nought befell to tell of. The witch-wife (for even such was she) fed the stolen child well and duly, and whiles caressed her and spake sweetly unto her; whiles also she would take her out of the pannier, and set her on the ass's back and hold her thereon heedfully; or, otherwhiles, when they came upon grassy and flowery places, she would set her down on the ground and let her roam about, and pluck the flowers and the strawberries. And whoso might be sorry, the child was glad, so many things new and fair as she came upon.

At last, when the fifth day was waning, and they had been a long while wending a wood set thick with trees, it began to grow grey betwixt the distant boles, and then from grey to white, and it was as if a new world of light lay before them. Thitherward went they, and in a little, and before the sun was set, came they to the shore of a great water, and thence was no more land to be seen before them than if it had been the main sea itself, though this was a sweet water. Albeit, less than a half mile from the shore lay two eyots, as it might have been on the salt sea; but one of these sat low down on the water, and was green and well bushed, but the other, which lay east of it, and was nigher to the shore, was high, rocky, and barren.

Now the ending of the wood left a fair green plain betwixt it and the water, whiles more than a

furlong across, whiles much less; and whiles the trees came down close to the water-side. But the place whereas they came from out the wood was of the widest, and there it was a broad bight of greensward of the fashion of the moon seven nights old, and a close hedge of thicket there was at the back of it; and the lake lay south, and the wood north. Some deal of this greensward was broken by closes of acre-land, and the tall green wheat stood blossoming therein; but the most was sweet meadow, and there as now was a gallant flock of goats feeding down it; five kine withal, and a tethered bull. Through the widest of this meadow ran a clear stream winding down to the lake, and on a little knoll beside a lap of the said stream, two bow-shots from the water, was a knoll, whereon stood, amidst of a potherb garden, a little house strongly framed of timber. Before it the steep bank of the lake broke down into a slowly-shelving beach, whose honey-coloured sand thrust up a tongue in amongst the grass of the mead.

Went the witch-wife straight to the door of the said house as if she were at home, as was sooth indeed. She threw the door open, and unladed the ass of all his wares, and first of the youngling, whom she shook awake, and bore into the house, and laid safely on the floor of the chamber; nor did she wait on her wailing, but set about what was to be done to kindle fire, and milk a she-goat, and get meat upon the board. That did she, and fed both herself and the child plenteously: neither did she stint her of meat ever, from that time forward, however else she dealt with her.

CHAPTER III. OF SKIN-CHANGING.

ONE thing must here be told: Whenas the said dame stood forth clad amidst of the chamber the next morning, the child ran up to her to greet her or what not, but straightway when she saw her close, drew aback, and stood gasping with affright; for verily she deemed this was nowise she who had brought her last night into the fair chamber, and given bread and milk to her and put her to bed, but someone else. For this one had not dark hair, and hooked nose, and eyen hawk-bright; stark and tall was she indeed, as that other one, and by seeming of the same-like age; but there came to an end all her likeness to last night's house-wife. This one had golden-red hair flowing down from her head; eyes of hazel colour, long and not well-opened, but narrow and sly. High of cheek-bones she was, long-chinned and thin-lipped; her skin was fine and white, but without ruddiness; flat-breasted she was, and narrow-hipped.

Now she laughed at the babe's terror, and said, but in her old voice at least: Thou foolish little beast! I know what scares thee, to wit, that thou deemest me changed: now I tell thee that I am the one who brought thee here last night, and fed thee; neither is my changing a matter of thine, since at least I am the one who shall keep thee from hunger and weather henceforward; that is enough for thee to know as now. Now thou hast to eat and sleep and play and cry out, that thou mayest the sooner wax, and grow into the doing of my will.

Therewith she led her out into the sunshine, and tethered her to an ash sapling which grew anigh the door, that the child might be safe the while she went about her work in acre and mead.

But as for that matter of changing of aspect, the maiden came to know thereafter that the witch durst not go into the wood in the same skin as that which she wore at home, wherefore she had changed it for the journey to Utterhay, and changed back again in the night-tide before she arose.

CHAPTER IV. OF THE WAXING OF THE STOLEN CHILD.

THIS little one, who is henceforth called Bird-alone, though the witch called her but seldom so, nor indeed by any name, dwelt there betwixt the water and the wood, and saw none save the said witch-wife, who, as aforesaid, fed her well, but scarce meddled with her else for a long while; so she wandered well-nigh as she had will, and much in the wood; for she had no fear thereof, nor indeed of aught else save of the dame. She learned of the ways and the wont of all the creatures round about her, and the very grass and flowers were friends to her, and she made tales of them in her mind; and the wild things feared her in no wise, and the fowl would come to her hand, and play with her and love her. A lovely child she was, rosy and strong, and as merry as the birds on the bough; and had she trouble, for whiles she came across some ugly mood of the witch-wife, she bore it all as lightly as they.

Wore the years thus, till now she was grown tall and thin, and had seen twelve winters, and was far stronger and handier than at first sight she looked to be. That found her mistress, and would not forego the using of her deftness. For indeed the maiden knew all matters of wood and field full well, and somewhat of the water also (though no boat had she ever seen there), for she learned herself swimming, as the ducks do belike.

But now her mistress would learn her swinking,

and hard was the lesson, for with twiggen rods and switches was she learned, and was somewhat stubborn with this woman, who she deemed loved her not; and, however it were, there began to grow in her an inkling that all was not well with the dame, and howsoever she might fear her, she trusted her not, nor worshipped her; otherwise she had learned her lesson speedily; for she was not slack nor a sluggard, and hated not the toil, even when it pained and wearied her, but against the anger and malice she hardened her heart.

It is to be said, that though there she dwelt alone with the witch-wife, she had somehow got to know that they two were not alone in the world, and she knew of male and female, and young and old. Thereof doubtless the witch herself had learned her, would she, would she not; for though she were mostly few-spoken, yet whiles the tongue of her would loosen, and she would tell Birdalone tales of men and women, and kings and warriors and thralls, and the folk of the world beyond them, if it were but to scare the child. Yea, and when she rated Birdalone, or girded at her, words would come forth which the maiden stored up, and by laying two and two together gat wisdom howso it were. Moreover, she was of the race of Adam, and her heart conceived of diverse matters from her mother's milk and her father's blood, and her heart and her mind grew up along with her body. Herein also was she wise, to wit, how to give wrath the go-by, so that she oft found the wood a better home than the house: for now she knew that the witch-wife

would enter it never; wherefore she loved it much, and haunted it daily if she might.

Amidst all this she lived not unmerrily; for the earth was her friend, and solaced her when she had suffered aught: withal she was soon grown hardy as well as strong; and evil she could thole, nor let it burden her with misery.

CHAPTER V. OF BIRDALONE, AND HOW SHE IS GROWN INTO MAIDENHOOD.

WEAR the years and the years amidst such days as these, and now is Birdalone grown a dear maiden of seventeen summers; and yet was her life not unhappy; though the mirth of her childhood was somewhat chastened in her, and she walked the earth soberly and measurely, as though deep thoughts were ever in her head: though, forsooth, it is not all so sure that her serious face and solemn eyes were but a part of the beauty which was growing with the coming forth of childhood into youth and maidenhood. But this at least is sure, that about this time those forebodings which had shown her that she had no call to love and honour her mistress took clearer shape, and became a burden on her, which she might never wholly shake off. For this she saw, that she was not her own, but a chattel and a tool of one who not only used her as a thrall in the passing day, but had it in her mind to make of her a thing accursed like to herself, and to bait the trap with her for the taking of the sons of Adam. Forsooth she saw, though dimly, that her mistress was indeed wicked, and that in the bonds of that wickedness was she bound.

One thing, moreover, had she noted now this long while, that once and again, it might be once every two moons, the witch-wife would arise in the dead of night and go forth from the house,

and be away for a day, or two or three, or whiles more, and come back again weary and fordone; but never said she any word to Birdalone hereof. Yet oft when she arose to go this errand, before she left the chamber would she come to Birdalone's truckle-bed, and stand over her to note if she were asleep or not; and ever at such times did Birdalone feign slumber amidst of sickening dread. Forsooth in these latter days it whiles entered the maiden's head that when the dame was gone she would rise and follow her and see whither she went, and what she did; but terror constrained her that she went not.

Now from amidst all these imaginings arose a hope in her that she might one day escape from her thralldom: and whiles, when she was lonely and safe in the wood, to this hope she yielded herself; but thereof came such tumult of her soul for joy of the hope, that she might not master her passion; the earth would seem to rise beneath her, and the woods to whirl about before her eyes, so that she might not keep her feet, but would sink adown to earth, and lie there weeping. Then most oft would come the cold fit after the hot, and the terror would take her that some day the witch would surprise the joy of that hope in her eyes, and would know what it meant, or that some light word might bewray her; and therewith came imaginings of what would then befall her, nor were that hard to picture, and it would come before her over and over again till she became weary and worn out therewith.

But though they abode ever with her, these troubling thoughts pricked not so oft at the keenest, but were as the dull ache of little import that comes after pain overcome: for in sooth busy and toilsome days did she wear, which irked her in nowise, since it eased her of the torment of those hopes and fears aforesaid, and brought her sound sleep and sweet awaking. The kine and the goats must she milk, and plough and sow and reap the acre-land according to the seasons, and lead the beasts to the woodland pastures when their own were flooded or burned; she must gather the fruits of the orchard, and the hazel nuts up the woodlands, and beat the walnut-trees in September. She must make the butter and the cheese, grind the wheat in the quern, make and bake the bread, and in all ways earn her livelihood hard enough. Moreover, the bowman's craft had she learned, and at the dame's bidding must fare alone into the wood now and again to slay big deer and little, and win venison: but neither did that irk her at all, for rest and peace were in the woods for her.

True it is, that as she wended thicket or glade or wood-lawn, she would at whiles grow timorous, and tread light and heedfully, lest rustling leaves or crackling stick should arouse some strange creature in human shape, devil, or god now damned, or woman of the faery. But if such were there, either they were wise and would not be seen, or kind and had no will to scare the simple maiden; or else maybe there were none such in those days. Anyhow, nought evil came to her out of Evilshaw.

CHAPTER VI. HEREIN IS TOLD OF BIRDALONE'S RAIMENT.

LANK and long is Birdalone the sweet, with legs that come forth bare and browned from under her scant grey coat and scantier smock beneath, which was all her raiment save when the time was bitter, and then, forsooth, it was a cloak of goat-skin that eked her attire: for the dame heeded little the clothing of her; nor did Birdalone give so much heed thereto that she cared to risk the anger of her mistress by asking her for aught.

But on a day of this same spring, when the witch-wife was of sweeter temper than her wont was, and the day was very warm and kindly, though it was but one of the last of February days, Birdalone, blushing and shame-faced, craved timidly some more womanly attire. But the dame turned gruffly on her and said: Tush, child! what needeth it? here be no men to behold thee. I shall see to it, that when due time comes thou shalt be whitened and sleeked to the very utmost. But look thou! thou art a handy wench; take the deer-skin that hangs up yonder and make thee brogues for thy feet, if so thou wilt.

Even so did Birdalone, and shaped the skin to her feet; but as she was sewing them a fancy came into her head; for she had just come across some threads of silk of divers colours; so she took them and her shoon and her needle up into the wood, and there sat down happily under a great spreading oak which much she haunted, and fell to broidering

the kindly deer-skin. And she got to be long about it, and came back to it the next day and the next, and many days, whenso her servitude would suffer it, and yet the shoon were scarce done.

So on a morning the dame looked on her feet as she moved about the chamber, and cried out at her: What! art thou barefoot as an hen yet? Hast thou spoilt the good deer-skin and art yet but shoeless? Nay, our lady, said Birdalone, but the shoon are not altogether done. Show them to me, said the dame.

Birdalone went to her little coffer to fetch them, and brought them somewhat timorously, for she knew not how her mistress would take her working on them so long, if perchance she would blame her, or it might be chastise her, for even in those days the witch-wife's hand was whiles raised against her. But now when the dame took the shoes and looked on them, and saw how there were oak-leaves done into them, and flowers, and coneys, and squirrels, she but smiled somewhat grimly on Birdalone, and said: Well, belike thou art a fool to waste thy time and mine in such toys; and to give thee thy due would be to give thee stripes. But thou doest herein after the nature of earthly women, to adorn thy body, whatsoever else is toward. And well is that, since I would have thee a woman so soon as may be; and I will help thy mind for finery, since thou art so deft with thy needle.

Therewith she went to the big coffer and drew forth thence a piece of fine green cloth, and another of fine linen, and said to Birdalone: This mayest

thou take, and make thee a gown thereof and a new smock, and make them if thou wilt as gay as thy new shoon are gotten to be; and here is wherewithal. And therewith she gave her two handfuls of silken threads and gold, and said: Now I suppose that I must do the more part of thy work, while thou art making thee these gaudy garments. But maybe someone may be coming this way ere long, who will deem the bird the finer for her fine feathers. Now depart from me; for I would both work for thee and me, and ponder weighty matters.

Who was glad now but Birdalone; she grew red with new pleasure, and knelt down and kissed the witch's hand, and then went her ways to the wood with her precious lading, and wrought there under her oak-tree day after day, and all days, either there, or in the house when the weather was foul. That was in the middle of March, when all birds were singing, and the young leaves showing on the hawthorns, so that there were pale green clouds, as it were, betwixt the great grey boles of oak and sweet-chestnut; and by the lake the meadow-saffron new-thrust-up was opening its blossom; and March wore and April, and still she was at work happily when now it was later May, and the hare-bells were in full bloom down the bent before her.

All this while the witch had meddled little with Birdalone, and had bidden her to no work afield or in the stead which was anywise grievous, but had done all herself; yet was she few-spoken with her, and would oft behold her gloomily. And one evening when Birdalone came in from the wood, the

witch came close up to her and stared her in the face, and said suddenly: Is it in thine heart to flee away from me and leave me?

A sharp pang of fear shot through Birdalone's heart at that word, and she turned very red, and then pale to the lips, but stammered out: No, lady, it is not in mine heart. The dame looked grimly on her and said: If thou try it and fail, thou shalt rue it once only, to wit, lifelong; and thou canst but fail. She was silent a while, and then spake in a milder voice: Be content here a while with me, and thereafter thou shalt be more content, and that before long.

She said no more at that time; but her word clave to Birdalone's heart, and for some time thereafter she was sorely oppressed with a burden of fear, and knew not how to hold herself before the witch-wife. But the days wore, and nought betid, and the maiden's heart grew lighter, and still she wrought on at her gown and her smock, and it was well-nigh done. She had broidered the said gown with roses and lilies, and a tall tree springing up from amidmost the hem of the skirt, and a hart on either side thereof, face to face of each other. And the smock she had sewn daintily at the hems and the bosom with fair knots and buds. It was now past the middle of June, hot and bright weather.

CHAPTER VII. BIRDALONE HATH AN ADVENTURE IN THE WOOD.

ON a day she went to the wood, and sat down under her oak-tree, and it was far and far out of sight of anyone standing in the meadow by the lake; and in the wood Birdalone looked to see nought at all save the rabbits and squirrels, who were, forsooth, familiar enough with her, and fearless, so that they would come to her hand and sport with her when she hailed them. Wherefore, as the day was exceeding hot, she put off from her her simple raiment, that she might feel all the pleasure of the cool shadow and what air was stirring, and the kindness of the green-sward upon her very body. So she sat sewing, covered but by a lap of the green gown which her needle was painting.

But as she sat there intent on her work, and her head bent over it, and it was now at the point of high noon, she heard as if some creature were going anigh to her; she heeded it not, deeming that it would be but some wandering hind. But even therewith she heard one say her name in a soft voice, and she leapt up trembling, deeming at first that it would be the witch come to fetch her: but yet more scared she was, when she saw standing before her the shape of a young woman as naked as herself, save that she had an oak wreath round about her loins.

The new-comer, who was now close to her, smiled on her, and said in a kind and sweet voice:

Fear nought, Birdalone, for I deem thou wilt find me a friend, and it is not unlike that thou wilt need one ere long. And furthermore, I will say it, said she smiling, that since I am not afraid of thee, thou needest not be afraid of me. Said Birdalone, she also smiling: True it is that thou art nought fearsome to look on. The new-comer laughed outright, and said: Are we not well met then in the wildwood? and we both as two children whom the earth loveth. So play we at a game. At what game? said Birdalone. Spake she of the oak-wreath: This; thou shalt tell me what I am like in thine eyes first, because thou wert afraid of me; and then when thou art done, I will tell thee what thou seemest to me.

Quoth Birdalone: For me that will be hard; for I have nought to liken thee to, whereas save this sight of thee I have seen nought save her that dwelleth in the House by the Water, and whom I serve. Nay, said the other, then will I begin, and tell thee first whatlike thou art, so that thou wilt know the better how to frame thy word concerning me. But tell me, hast thou ever seen thyself in a mirror? What thing is that? said Birdalone. It is a polished round of steel or some other white metal, said the wood-maiden, which giveth back in all truth the image of whatso cometh before it.

Said Birdalone, and reddened therewith: We have at home a broad latten dish, which it is my work, amongst other things, to brighten and keep bright; yet may I not make it so bright that I may see much of mine image therein; and yet. What

wouldst thou? said the wood-woman. Said Bird-alone: I shall tell thee presently when thy part of the play is done.

Laughed the new-comer, and said: It is well; now am I to be thy mirror. Thus it is with thee: thou standest before me a tall and slim maiden, somewhat thin, as befitteth thy seventeen summers; where thy flesh is bare of wont, as thy throat and thine arms and thy legs from the middle down, it is tanned a beauteous colour, but otherwhere it is even as fair a white, wholesome and clean, and as if the golden sunlight, which fulfilleth the promise of the earth, were playing therein. Fairer and rounder shall be thine arms and thy shoulders when thou hast seen five more summers, yet scarce more lovesome, so strong and fine as now they are. Low are thy breasts, as is meet for so young a maiden, yet is there no lack in them; nor ever shall they be fairer than now they are. In goodly fashion sits thine head upon thy shoulders, upheld by a long and most well-wrought neck, that the sun hath tanned as aforesaid. The hair of thee is simple brown, yet somewhat more golden than dark; and ah! now thou lettest it loose it waveth softly past thy fair smooth forehead and on to thy shoulders, and is not stayed by thy girdlestead, but hideth nought of thy knees, and thy legs shapely thin, and thy strong and clean-wrought ankles and feet, which are with thee as full of thine heart and thy soul and as wise and deft as be thy wrists and thine hands, and their very fellows. Now as to thy face: under that

smooth forehead is thy nose, which is of measure, neither small nor great, straight, and lovely carven at the nostrils: thine eyen are as grey as a hawk's, but kind and serious, and nothing fierce nor shifting. Nay, now thou lettest thine eyelids fall, it is as fair with thy face as if they were open, so smooth and simple are they and with their long full lashes. But well are thine eyen set in thine head, wide apart, well opened, and so as none shall say thou mayst not look in the face of them. Thy cheeks shall one day be a snare for the unwary, yet are they not fully rounded, as some would have them; but not I, for most pitiful kind are they forsooth. Delicate and clear-made is the little trench that goeth from thy nose to thy lips, and sweet it is, and there is more might in it than in sweet words spoken. Thy lips, they are of the finest fashion, yet rather thin than full; and some would not have it so; but I would, whereas I see therein a sign of thy valiancy and friendliness. Surely he who did thy carven chin had a mind to a master-work and did no less. Great was the deftness of thine imaginer, and he would have all folk that see thee wonder at thy deep thinking and thy carefulness and thy kindness. Ah maiden! is it so that thy thoughts are ever deep and solemn? Yet at least I know it of thee that they be hale and true and sweet.

My friend, when thou hast a mirror, some of all this shalt thou see, but not all; and when thou hast a lover some deal wilt thou hear, but not all. But now thy she-friend may tell it thee all, if she

have eyes to see it, as have I; whereas no man could say so much of thee before the mere love should overtake him, and turn his speech into the folly of love and the madness of desire. So now I have played the play, and told thee of thee; tell me now of me, and play thy play.

For a while stood Birdalone silent, blushing and confused, but whiles casting shy glances at her own body, what she might see of it. At last she spake: Fair friend, I would do thy will, but I am not deft of speech; for I speak but little, save with the fowl and wild things, and they may not learn me the speech of man. Yet I will say that I wonder to hear thee call me fair and beauteous; for my dame tells me that never, nor sayeth aught of my aspect save in her anger, and then it is: Rag! and bag-of-bones! and when wilt thou be a woman, thou lank elf thou? The new-comer laughed well-favouredly hereat, and put forth a hand, and stroked her friend's cheek. Birdalone looked piteous kind on her and said: But now I must needs believe thy words, thou who art so kind to me, and withal thyself so beauteous. And I will tell thee that it fills my heart with joy to know that I am fair like to thee. For this moreover I will tell thee, that I have seen nought in field or woodland that is as lovely to me as thou art; nay, not the fritillary nodding at our brook's mouth, nor the willow-boughs waving on Green Eyot; nor the wild-cat sporting on the little wood-lawn, when she saw me not; nor the white doe rising up from the grass to look to her fawn; nor

aught that moves and grows. Yet there is another thing which I must tell thee, to wit, that what thou hast said about the fashion of any part of me, that same, setting aside thy lovely words, which make the tears come into the eyes of me, would I say of thee. Look thou! I take thine hair and lay the tress amongst mine, and thou mayst not tell which is which; and amidst the soft waves of it thy forehead is nestling smooth as thou saidst of mine: hawk-grey and wide apart are thine eyen, and deep thought and all tenderness is in them, as of me thou sayest: fine is thy nose and of due measure; and thy cheeks a little hollow, and somewhat thin thy lovely lips; and thy round chin so goodly carven, as it might not be better done. And of thy body else I will say as thou sayst of mine, though I deem these hands have done more work than thine. But see thou! thy leg and mine as they stand together; and thine arm, as if it were of my body. Slim and slender thou art, or it may be lank; and I deem our dame would call thee also bag-of-bones. Now is this strange. Who art thou? Art thou my very own sister? I would thou wert.

Spake then to Birdalone that image of her, and said, smiling kindly on her: As to our likeness, thou hast it now; so alike are we, as if we were cast in one mould. But thy sister of blood I am not; nay, I will tell thee at once that I am not of the children of Adam. As to what I am, that is a long story, and I may not tell it as now; but thou mayst call me Habundia, as I call thee

Birdalone. Now it is true that to everyone I show not myself in this fair shape of thee; but be not aghast thereat, or deem me like unto thy mistress herein, for as now I am, so ever shall I be unto thee.

Quoth Birdalone, looking on her anxiously: Yea, and I shall see thee again, shall I not? else should I grieve, and wish that I had never seen thee at all. Yea, forsooth, said Habundia, for I myself were most fain to see thee oft. But now must thou presently get thee back home, for evil as now is the mood of thy mistress, and she is rueing the gift of the green gown, and hath in her mind to seek occasion to chastise thee.

Now was Birdalone half weeping, as she did on her raiment while her friend looked on her kindly. She said presently: Habundia, thou seest I am hard bestead; give me some good rede thereto.

That will I, said the wood-wife. When thou goest home to the house, be glad of countenance, and joyous that thy gown is nigh done; and therewith be exceeding wary. For I deem it most like that she will ask thee what thou hast seen in the wood, and then if thou falter, or thy face change, then she will have an inkling of what hath befallen, to wit, that thou hast seen someone; and then will she be minded to question thy skin. But if thou keep countenance valiantly, then presently will her doubt run off her, and she will cease grudging, and will grow mild with thee and meddle not. This is the first

rede, and is for to-day; and now for the second, which is for days yet unborn. Thou hast in thy mind to flee away from her; and even so shalt thou do one day, though it may be by way of Weeping Cross; for she is sly and wise and grim, though sooth it is that she hateth thee not utterly. Now thou must note that nowise she hindereth thee from faring in this wood, and that is because she wotteth, as I do, that by this way there is no outgoing for thee. Wherefore look thou to it that it is by the way of the water that thou shalt fare to the land of men-folk. Belike this may seem marvellous to thee; but so it is; and belike I may tell thee more hereof when time serveth. Now cometh the last word of my rede. Maybe if thou come often to the wood, we shall whiles happen on each other; but if thou have occasion for me, and wouldst see me at once, come hither, and make fire, and burn a hair of my head therein, and I will be with thee: here is for thee a tress of mine hair; now thou art clad, thou mayst take a knife from thy pouch and shear it from off me.

Even so did Birdalone, and set the tress in her pouch; and therewith they kissed and embraced each other, and Birdalone went her ways home to the house, but Habundia went back into the wood as she had come.

CHAPTER VIII. OF BIRDALONE AND THE WITCH-WIFE.

IT went with Birdalone as Habundia had foretold, for she came home to the house glad of semblance, flushed and light-foot, so that she was lovely and graceful beyond her wont. The dame looked on her doubtfully and grimly a while, and then she said: What ails thee, my servant, that thou lookest so masterful? Nought ails me, lady, said Birdalone, save that I am gay because of the summer season, and chiefly because of thy kindness and thy gift, and that I have well-nigh done my work thereon, and that soon now I shall feel these dainty things beating about my ankles. And she held up and spread abroad the skirt with her two hands, and it was indeed goodly to look on.

The witch-wife snorted scornfully and scowled on her, and said: Thine ankles forsooth! Bag-o'-bones! thou wisp! forsooth, thou art in love with thy looks, though thou knowest not what like a fair woman is. Forsooth, I begin to think that thou wilt never grow into a woman at all, but will abide a skinny elf thy life long. Belike I did myself wrong to suffer thee to waste these three or four months of thy thrall's work, since for nought but thrall's work shalt thou ever be meet.

Birdalone hung her head adown, and blushed, but smiled a little, and swayed her body gently, as a willow-bough is swayed when a light air arises in the morning. But the witch stood so scowling on

her, and with so sour a look, that Birdalone, glancing at her, found her heart sink so within her, that she scarce kept countenance; yet she lost it not.

Then said the witch sharply: Wert thou in the wood to-day? Yea, lady, said the maiden. Then said the dame fiercely: And what sawest thou? Quoth Birdalone, looking up with an innocent face somewhat scared: Lady, I saw a bear, one of the big ones, crossing a glade. And thou without bow and arrow or wood-knife, I warrant me, said the witch. Thou shalt be whipped, to keep thee in mind that thy life is mine and not thine. Nay, nay, I pray thee be not wroth! said the maid; he was a long way down the glade, and would not have followed me if he had seen me: there was no peril therein. Said the witch-wife: Didst thou see aught else? Yea, said Birdalone, and was weeping somewhat now; which forsooth was not hard for her to do, over-wrought as she was betwixt hope and fear: yea, I saw my white doe and her fawn, and they passed close by me; and two herons flew over my head toward the water; and But the witch turned sharply and said: Thrall! hast thou seen a woman to-day in the wood? A woman? said Birdalone, and what woman, my lady, said Birdalone. Hath any woman come to the house, and passed forth into the wood?

The dame looked on her carefully, and remembered how she had faltered and changed countenance that other day, when she had charged her with being minded to flee; and now she saw her with wondering face, and in no wise confused or

afraid of guilt, as it seemed; so she believed her tale, and being the more at ease thereby, her wrath ran off her, and she spake altogether pleasantly to Birdalone, and said: Now I have had my gird at thee, my servant, I must tell thee that in sooth it is not all for nothing that thou hast had these months of rest; for verily thou hast grown more of a woman thereby, and hast sleekened and rounded much. Albeit, the haysel will wait no longer for us, and the day after to-morrow we must fall to on it. But when that is done, thou shalt be free to do thy green gown, or what thou wilt, till wheat harvest is toward; and thereafter we shall see to it. Or what sayest thou?

Birdalone wondered somewhat at this so gracious word, but not much; for in her heart now was some guile born to meet the witch's guile; so she knelt down and took the dame's hands and kissed them, and said: I say nought, lady, save that I thank thee over and over again that thou art become so good to me; and that I will full merrily work for thee in the hay-field, or at whatsoever else thou wilt.

And indeed she was so light-hearted that she had so escaped from the hand of the witch for that time, and above all, that she had gotten a friend so kind and dear as the wood-woman, that her heart went out even toward her mistress, so that she went nigh to loving her.

CHAPTER IX. OF BIRDALONE'S SWIMMING.

FULL fair was the morrow morn, and Birdalone arose betimes before the sun was up, and she thought she would make of this a holiday before the swink afield began again, since the witch was grown good toward her. So she did on her fair shoes, and her new raiment, though the green gown was not fully done, and said to herself that she would consider what she would do with her holiday when she was amidst of her bathing.

So she went down to the water-side, and when she was standing knee-deep in the little sandy bight aforesaid, she looked over to Green Eyot, and was minded to swim over thither, as oft she did. And it was a windless dawn after a hot night, and a light mist lay upon the face of the water, and above it rose the greenery of the eyot.

She pushed off into the deep and swam strongly through the still water, and the sun rose while she was on the way, and by then she had laid a hand on the willow-twigs of the eyot, was sending a long beam across the waters; and her wet shoulders rose up into the path of it and were turned into ruddy gold. She hoisted herself up, and climbing the low bank, was standing amongst the meadow-sweet, and dripping on to its fragrance. Then she turned about to the green plain and the house and the hedge of woodland beyond, and sighed, and said softly: A pity of it, to leave it! If it were no better otherwhere, and not so fair?

CHAPTER X. BIRDALONE COMES ON NEW TIDINGS.

SOON she had covered up the house from her, for on that eastern end, both a tongue of the woodland shoved out west into the meadow, and, withal, the whole body of the wood there drew down to the water, and presently cut off all the green-sward save a narrow strip along by the lake, off the narrowest whereof lay the rocky eyot aforesaid, nigher unto the shore than lay Green Eyot.

Now never had Birdalone gone so far east as to be over against Rock Eyot. In her childish days the witch had let her know that she might go where she would, but therewith had told her a tale of a huge serpent which dwelt in the dark wood over against Rock Eyot, whose wont it was to lap his folds round and round living things that went there, and devour them; and many an evil dream had that evil serpent brought to Birdalone. In after days belike she scarce trowed in the tale, yet the terror of it abode with her. Moreover the wildwood toward that side, as it drew toward the water, was dark and dreary and forbidding, running into black thickets standing amidst quagmires, all unlike to the sweet, clean upland ridges, oak begrown and green-swarded, of the parts which lay toward the north, and which she mostly haunted.

But this summer day, which was so bright and hot, Birdalone deemed she might harden her heart to try the adventure; and she had a mind to enter the wood thereby, and win her way up into the

oakland whereas she had met Habundia, and perchance she might happen on her; for she would not dare to summon her so soon after their first meeting. And if she met her, there would be the holiday worthily brought to an end!

On went Birdalone, and was soon at the narrowest of the greensward, and had the wood black on her left hand, for the trees of it were mostly alder. But when she was come just over against Rock Eyot, she found a straight creek or inlet of the water across her way; and the said creek ran right up into the alder thicket; and, indeed, was much overhung by huge ancient alders, gnarled, riven, mossy, and falling low over the water. But close on the mouth of the creek, on Birdalone's side thereof, lay a thing floating on the dull water, which she knew not how to call a boat, for such had she never seen, nor heard of, but which was indeed a boat, oarless and sailless.

She looked on it all about, and wondered; yet she saw at once that it was for wending the water, and she thought, might she but have a long pole, she might push it about the shallow parts of the lake, and belike take much fish. She tried to shove it somewhat toward the lake, but with her little might could make nothing of the work; for the craft was heavy, like a barge, if there were nothing else that withstood her.

About this new thing she hung a long while, wondering that she had never heard thereof, or been set to toil therewith. She noted that it was mostly pale grey of hue, as if it had been bleached

by sun and water, but at the stem and stern were smears of darker colour, as though someone had been trying the tints of staining there.

Now so much did this new matter take up all her mind, that she thought no more of going up into the wood; but though she had fain abided there long to see whatever might be seen, she deemed it would go ill with her did the witch happen on her there; wherefore she turned about, and went back the way she had come, going very slowly and pondering the tidings. And ever she called to mind what Habundia had said to her, that it was by water she must flee, and wondered if she had sent her this thing that she might escape therein; so different as her going would be thereby to swimming the lake with her wet body. Then again she thought, that before she might let herself hope this, it were best, if she might, to find out from the witch what was the thing, and if she knew thereof. Yet at last she called to mind how little patient of questions was her mistress, and that if she were unheedful she might come to raise an evil storm about her. Wherefore she took this rede at the last, that she would keep all hidden in her own breast till she should see Habundia again; and meanwhile she might steal down thither from time to time to see if the thing still abode there; which she might the easier do by swimming if she chose her time heedfully, and go thither from Rock Eyot, which now and again she visited.

CHAPTER XI. OF BIRDALONE'S GUILT AND THE CHASTISEMENT THEREOF.

BY this she was come back to the sandy bight, and the sun was westering; and she looked up toward the house and saw that it was the time of their evening meal, for the blue smoke of the cooking fire was going up into the air. So she went thither speedily, and entered gay of seeming. The witch looked on her doubtfully, but presently fell to speaking with her graciously as yesterday, and Birdalone was glad and easy of mind, and went about the serving of her; for always she ate after the dame; and the mistress asked her of many matters concerning the house, and the gathering of stuff.

So came the talk on the fishing of the brook that ran before their door, and how the trouts therein were but little, and not seldom none at all; and even therewith came these words into Birdalone's mouth, she scarce knew how: My lady, why do we not fish the lake, whereas there be shoal places betwixt us and the eyots where lie many and great fish, as I have seen when I have been swimming thereover? And now in that same creek whereas the serpent used to lurk when I was little, we have a thing come, which is made to swim on the water; and I, could I have a long pole to shove withal.

But no time she had to make an end, ere the witch-wife sprang up and turned on her with a snarl as of an evil dog, and her face changed horribly:

her teeth showed grinning, her eyes goggled in her head, her brow was all to-furrowed, and her hands clenched like iron springs.

Birdalone shuddered back from her and cringed in mere terror, but had no might to cry out. The witch hauled her up by the hair, and dragged her head back so that her throat lay bare before her all along. Then drew the witch a sharp knife from her girdle, and raised her hand over her, growling and snarling like a wolf. But suddenly she dropped the knife, her hand fell to her side, and she fell in a heap on the floor and lay there hushed.

Birdalone stood gazing on her, and trembling in every limb; too confused was she to think or do aught, though some image of flight through the open door passed before her: but her feet seemed of lead, and, as in an evil dream, she had no might to move her limbs, and the minutes went by as she stood there half dead with fear.

At last, (and belike it was no long while) the witch-wife came to herself again, and sat up on the floor, and looked all about the chamber, and when her eyes fell upon Birdalone, she said in a weak voice, yet joyfully; Hah! thou art there still, my good servant! Then she said: A sickness fell upon me suddenly, as whiles it is wont; but now am I myself again; and presently I have a word for thee.

Therewith she rose up slowly, Birdalone helping her, and sat in her big chair silent awhile, and then she spake: My servant, thou hast for the more part served me well: but this time thou hast done

ill, whereas thou hast been spying on my ways; whereof may come heavy trouble but if we look to it. Well is it for thee that thou hast none unto whom thou mightest babble; for then must I needs have slain thee here and now. But for this first time I pardon thee, and thou hast escaped the wrath.

Her voice was soft and wheedling; but for Birdalone the terror had entered into her soul, and yet abode with her.

The witch-wife sat a while, and then arose and went about the chamber, and came to a certain aumbry and opened it, and drew forth a little flasket of lead and a golden cup scored over with strange signs, and laid them on the board beside her chair, wherein she now sat down again, and spake once more, still in the same soft and wheedling voice: Yet, my servant, thy guilt would be required of me, if I let this pass as if to-day were the same as yesterday; yea, and of thee also would it be required; therefore it is a part of the pardon that thou be corrected: and the correction must be terrible to thee, that thou mayst remember never again to thrust thyself into the jaws of death. And what may I do to correct thee? It shall be in a strange way, such as thou hast never dreamed of. Yet the anguish thereof shall go to thine heart's root; but this must thou needs bear, for my good and thine, so that both we may live and be merry hereafter. Go now, fill this cup with water from the spring and come back with it. Birdalone took the cup with a sinking heart, and filled it, and brought it

back, and stood before the witch more dead than alive.

Then the witch-wife took up the flasket and pulled out the stopple and betook it to Birdalone, and said: Drink of this now, a little sip, no more. And the maiden did so, and the liquor was no sooner down her gullet than the witch-wife and the chamber, and all things about her, became somewhat dim to her; but yet not so much so as that she could not see them. But when she stretched out her arm she could see it not at all, nor her limbs nor any other part of her which her eyes might fall upon. Then would she have uttered a lamentable wail, but the voice was sealed up in her and no sound came from her voice. Then she heard the witch-wife how she said (and yet she heard it as if her voice came from afar), Nay, thou canst not speak, and thou canst not see thyself, nor may any other, save me, and I but dimly. But this is but part of what I must lay upon thee; for next I must give thee a new shape, and that both thyself and all other may see. But, before I do that, I must speak a word to thee, which thy new shape would not suffer the sense thereof to reach to thine heart. Hearken!

CHAPTER XII. THE WORDS OF THE WITCH-WIFE TO BIRDALONE.

SAID the witch-wife: When thou comest to thyself (for it is not my will that thou shouldest never have thine own shape again), doubtless the first thing which thou shalt do with thy new-gained voice and thy new-gained wit shall be to curse me, and curse me again. Do as thou wilt herein; but I charge thee, disobey me not, for that shall bring thee to thy bane. For if thou do not my bidding, and if thou pry into my matters, and lay bare that which I will have hidden, then will it be imputed unto thee for guilt, and will I, will I not, I must be avenged on thee even to slaying: and then is undone all the toil and pain I have had in rearing thee into a deft and lovely maiden. Deem thou, then, this present anguish kind to thee, to keep thee that thou come not to nought.

Now since I have begun speaking, I will go on; for little heretofore have I spoken to thee what was in mine heart. Well I wot that thou thinkest of me but as of an evil dream, whereof none can aught but long to awake from it. Yet I would have thee look to this at least; that I took thee from poverty and pinching, and have reared thee as faithfully as ever mother did to child; clemming thee never, smiting thee not so oft, and but seldom cruelly. Moreover, I have suffered thee to go whereso thou wouldest, and have compelled thee to toil for nought but what was needful for our two livelihoods. And I have not stayed thy swimmings in the lake, nor

thy wanderings in the wood, and thou hast learned bowshot there, till thou art now a past-master in the craft: and, moreover, thou art swift-foot as the best of the deer, and mayest over-run any one of them whom thou wilt.

Soothly a merry life hast thou had as a child, and merry now would be thy life, save for thine hatred of me. Into a lovely lily-lass hast thou grown. That I tell thee now, though my wont has been to gird at thee for the fashion of thy body; that was but the word of the mistress to the thrall. And now what awaiteth thee? For thou mayst say: I am lonely here, and there is no man to look on me. Of what avail, therefore, is my goodliness and shapeliness? Child, I answer thee that the time is coming when thou shalt see here a many of the fairest of men, and then shalt thou be rather rose than lily, and fully come to womanhood; and all those shall love and worship thee, and thou mayst gladden whom thou wilt, and whom thou wilt mayst sadden; and no lack soever shalt thou have of the sweetness of love, or the glory of dominion.

Think of it then! All this is for thee if thou dwell here quietly with me, doing my will till thy womanhood hath blossomed. Wherefore I beseech and pray thee put out of thy mind the thought of fleeing from me. For if thou try it, one of two things shall be: either I shall bring thee back and slay thee, or make thee live in misery of torment; or else thou wilt escape, and then what will it be? Dost thou know how it shall go

with thee, coming poor and nameless, an outcast, into the world of men? Lust shalt thou draw unto thee, but scarce love. I say an outcast shalt thou be, without worship or dominion; thy body shall be a prey to ribalds, and when the fine flower thereof hath faded, thou shalt find that the words of thy lovers were but mockery. That no man shall love thee, and no woman aid thee. Then shall Eld come to thee and find thee at home with Hell; and Death shall come and mock thee for thy life cast away for nought, for nought. This is my word to thee: and now I have nought to do to thee save to change thee thy skin, and therein must thou do as thou canst, but it shall be no ugly or evil shape at least. But another time maybe I shall not be so kind as to give thee a new shape, but shall let thee wander about seen by none but me. Then she took the cup and took water in the hollow of her hand and cast it into Birdalone's face, and muttered words withal; and presently she saw herself indeed, that she was become a milk-white hind; and she heard and saw again, but not as she, the maiden, was wont to hear and see; for both her hearing and seeing and her thought was of a beast and not of a maiden.

Said the witch-wife: It is done now, till I give thee grace again; and now be off into the field; but if thou stray more than half a bowshot from the brook, it shall be the worse for thee. And now the day was done and night was come.

CHAPTER XIII. BIRDALONE MEETETH THE WOOD-WOMAN AGAIN.

IT was fifteen days thereafter that Birdalone awoke lying in her bed on a bright morning, as if all this had been but a dream. But the witch-wife was standing over her and crying out: Thou art late, slug-a-bed, this fair-weather day, and the grass all spoiling for lack of the scythe. Off! and down to the meadow with thee.

Birdalone waited not for more words, but sprang out of bed, and had her work-a-day raiment on in a twinkling, and stayed but to wash her in a pool of the brook, and then was amidst the tall grass with the swathe falling before her. As she worked she thought, and could scarce tell whether joy at her present deliverance, or terror of the witch-wife, were the greatest. Sore was her longing to go see her friend in the wood, but the haysel lasted more than a week, and when that was done, whether it were of set purpose or no, the dame forgat her other promise, to give Birdalone more holiday, and kept her close to her work about meadow and acre. Otherwise her mistress nowise mishandled or threatened her, though she had gone back to the surliness and railing which was her wont. At last, on a morning when the dame had bidden her to nought of work, Birdalone took her bow in her hand and cast her quiver on her back, and went her ways into the wood, and forgat not the tress of Habundia's hair; but she had no need to use it, for when she was come to the Oak of Tryst, straightway came Habundia

forth from the thicket, and now so like to Birdalone that it was a wonder, for as her friend she bare bow and quiver, and green gown trussed up till her knees were naked.

So they kissed and embraced, and Birdalone wept upon her friend's bosom, but was ashamed of the words which would have told her of her case. Then Habundia set her down upon the greensward, and sat down beside her, and caressed her and soothed her; then she smiled on Birdalone, and said: Thy tale is partly told without words, and I would weep for thee if I might shed tears. But thou mayest tell me wherefore thou didst suffer this; though forsooth I have an inkling thereof. Hast thou happened on the witch's ferry?

Even so it was, sister, quoth Birdalone. And therewith she plucked up heart, and told her all the tale of the vanishing of her body and the skin-changing. And Habundia answered: Well then, there is this to be said, that sooner or later this must have happened, for thereby lieth thy road of escape; wherefore it is better sooner than later. But tell me again: was she fierce and rough in words with thee? for what she said to thee thou hast not yet told me. Said Birdalone: In her first fury, when she was like to have slain me, she had no words, nought but wolfish cries. But thereafter she spake unto me strangely, yet neither fiercely nor roughly; nay, it seemed to me as if almost she loved me. And more than almost she besought me rather than commanded me not to flee from her. And wert thou beguiled by her soft speech? said Habundia. No-

wise to cast aside my hope of escape, nay, not even in that hour, said Birdalone; but amidst all the confusion and terror somewhat was I moved to compassion on her.

Spake Habundia, looking anxiously on her: Dost thou deem that thou art somewhat cowed by what she hath done to thee? Said Birdalone, and flushed very red: Oh no, no! Nought save death or bonds shall come betwixt me and my utmost striving for escape. That is better than well, said Habundia; but again, canst thou have patience a little, and be wary and wise the while? So me-seemeth, said the maiden. Said Habundia: Again it is well. Now is the summer beginning to wane, and by my rede thou shalt not try the flight until May is come again and well-nigh worn into June; for thou wilt be bigger then, little sister, and tidings are waxing that shall get matters ready for thy departure: moreover, thou must yet learn what thou hast to do meanwhile, and thereof shall I tell thee somewhat as now. For that boat, the thing which thou didst find, and for which thou didst suffer, is called the Sending Boat, and therein thy mistress fareth time and again, I deem to seek to some other of her kind, but I know not unto whom, or whereto. Hast thou noted of her that whiles she goeth away privily by night and cloud? Yea, verily, said Birdalone, and this is one of the things which heretofore hath made me most afraid. Said Habundia: Well now, that she wendeth somewhither in this ferry I wot; but as I wot not whither, so also I know not what she doth with the Sending Boat to

make it obey her; whereas, though I know all things of the wood, I know but little of the lake. Wherefore, though there be peril to thee therein, follow her twice or thrice when she riseth up for this faring, and note closely what is her manner of dealing with the said Sending Boat, so that thou mayst do in like wise. Wilt thou risk the smart and the skin-changing, or even if it were the stroke of the knife, to gather this wisdom? And thereafter thou shalt come hither and tell me how thou hast sped. With a good heart will I, dear sister, said Birdalone.

Then Habundia kissed her and said: It is a joy to me to see thee so valiant, but herein may I help thee somewhat; here is a gold finger-ring, see thou! fashioned as a serpent holding his tail in his mouth; whenso thou goest on this quest, set thou this same ring on the middle finger of thy left hand, and say thou above thy breath at least:

To left and right,
Before, behind,
Of me be sight
As of the wind!

And nought then shall be seen of thee even by one who standeth close beside. But wear not the ring openly save at such times, or let the witch have sight thereof ever, or she will know that thou hast met me. Dost thou understand, and canst thou remember?

Laughed Birdalone, and took the ring and set it on her finger, and spake aloud even as Habundia

had given her the words. Then quoth Habundia, laughing: Now have I lost my friend and sister, for thou art gone, Birdalone. Take off the ring, sweetling, and get thee to thine hunting, for if thou come home empty-handed there will be flyting awaiting thee, or worse.

So Birdalone took off the ring and came back to sight again laughing; then the wood-woman kissed her and turned her heels to her, and was gone; but Birdalone strung her bow, and got to her wood-craft, and presently had a brace of hares, wherewith she went back home to the dame; who indeed girded at her for her sloth, and her little catch in so long a while; but there it ended.

CHAPTER XIV. OF BIRDALONE'S FISHING.

NOW were the days wearing toward wheat-harvest, and nought befel to tell of, save that on a morn the witch-wife called Birdalone to her, and said: Now is little to be done till the wheat is ready for the hook, and thy days are idle; or what is that word that fell from thee that other day, that there be good swims for fish about the eyots? Canst thou swim across bearing thine angle, and back again therewith, and thy catch withal? Yea, certes, said Birdalone gaily; with one hand I may swim gallantly, or with my legs alone, if I stir mine arms ever so little. I will go straightway if thou wilt, lady; but give me a length of twine so that I may tie my catch about my middle when I swim back again.

Therewith she went forth lightly to fetch her angle, which was in a shed without; but just as she took it in her hand, a sudden thought came to her, so wary as she was grown. She undid the bosom of her gown, and took forth her serpent-ring; for she bore it next to her skin, made fast to the bosom of her smock; but now she hid it carefully in the thickest of her brow-hair, which was very thick and soft. Withal the tress of Habundia's hair she bore ever mingled with her own.

No sooner had she done it, but she was glad; for she heard the dame calling her, who, when she came to the house-door, spake and said: Now shall I fare with thee down to the water, and look to thy

garments lest they be fouled by some straying beast. And therewith she looked curiously on Birdalone, and knit her brows when she saw that the maiden changed countenance in nowise.

Down to the water went they, and the witch sat down close to where Birdalone should take the water, and watched her do off her raiment, and eyed her keenly when she was bare, but said nought. Birdalone turned her head as she stood knee-deep, and said: How long shall I abide, lady, if I have luck? As long as thou wilt, said the dame: most like I shall be gone by then thou comest back, even if thou be away no long while.

Fell Birdalone to swimming then, and when she was more than half over, the witch, stirring no more than need was, got hold of her raiment, which was but the old grey coat over a smock, and ransacked it, but found nought, as well ye may wot. And when she had done, she sat down again in heavy mood as it seemed, and watched Birdalone swimming, and when she beheld her body come forth out of the water, and pass out of sight amongst the flowers of the eyot, she arose and went her ways home.

Birdalone looked through the willow-boughs, and saw her turn away; then she fared to her fishing with a smile, and soon had plenteous catch from under the willow-boughs. Then, whereas the day was very calm and fair, and the dame had given her holiday, she wandered about the eyot, and most in a little wood of berry-trees, as quicken and white-beam and dog-wood, and sported with the

birds, who feared her not, but came and sat on her shoulders, and crept about her feet. She went also and stood a while on the southern shore, and looked on the wide water dim in the offing under the hot-weather haze, and longed to be gone beyond it. Then she turned away, and to the other shore, and gat her fish and strung them on the string, and made them fast to her middle, and so took the water back again to the yellow strand, where now was no one awaiting her. But before she did on her garments, she looked on them, and saw that they lay not as she had left them, whereby she knew well that the witch-wife had handled them.

Amidst all this the day was wearing to an end, and again she saw the smoke of the cooking-fire going up into the air from the chimney of the house; and she smiled ruefully, thinking that the witch might yet find an occasion for ransacking her raiment. But she plucked up heart, and came home with her catch, and the dame met her with a glum face, and neither praised her nor blamed her, but took the fish silently. Such ending had that day.

CHAPTER XV. BIRDALONE WEARETH HER SERPENT-RING.

AFTER this she went once and again fishing on to Green Eyot by the bidding of the dame, who went not again to the shore with her. These times she had half a mind to go see the Sending Boat, but durst not, lest the thing itself might have life enough to tell of her.

And now was come the time of wheat-harvest, and Birdalone must wear her days swinking in the acre-land, clad but in smock and shoes; and the toil was hard, and browned her skin and hardened her hands, but it irked her not, for the witch let her work all alone, and it was holiday unto the maiden if her mistress were not anigh, despite those words which had somewhat touched her heart that other day.

But when wheat-getting was done, there was again rest for her body, and swimming withal and fishing from the eyot by the witch's leave. And again by her own leave she went to seek Habundia in the wood, and spent a happy hour with her, and came back with a fawn which she had shot, and so but barely saved her skin from the twig-shower. Then yet again she went into the wood on the witch's errand as well as her own, and was paid by her friend's sweet converse, and by nought else save the grudging girding of her mistress.

But on a night when September was well in, and the sky was moonless and overcast, somewhat before midnight the dame came and hung over Bird-

alone as she lay abed, and watched to see if she waked; forsooth the witch's coming had waked her; but even so she was wary, and lay still, nor changed her breathing. So the witch turned away, but even therewith Birdalone made a shift to get a glimpse of her, and this she saw thereby, that the semblance of her was changed, and that she bore the self-same skin wherewith she had come to Utterhay, and which she had worn twice or thrice afterwards when she had an errand thither.

The witch now glided swiftly to the door, and out into the night. Birdalone lay still a little, lest she should fall into a trap, and then arose very quietly and did on her smock, which lay ever under her pillow with the ring sewn thereto again, and so went out adoors also, and deemed she saw the witch some way on ahead; but it was nothing for her light feet to overtake her. So she stayed to take the ring from her smock, and set it on her finger; then in a low voice she said:

To left and right,
Before, behind,
Of me be sight
As of the wind!

Then boldly she sped on, and was soon close on the heels of the witch, who made her way to the edge of the lake, and then turned east, and went even as Birdalone had gone when she came across the Sending Boat.

So fared the witch-wife straight to the creek-side, and Birdalone must needs stick close to her, or

she had known nought, so black was the night amongst the alder-boughs. But the witch-wife fumbled about a while when she was stayed by the creek, and presently drew somewhat from under her cloak, and the maiden saw that she was about striking flint upon steel, and quaked somewhat, lest her charm had played her false. Presently the tinder quickened, and the dame had lighted a lantern, which she held up, peering all about; and full she looked on the place whereas was Birdalone, and made no show of seeing her, though well-nigh the maiden looked for it to see her drop the lantern and spring on her.

Now the witch, holding the lantern aloft, steps over the gunwale of the boat, and sits down on the thwart; and it was a near thing but that Birdalone followed her into the boat, but she feared the getting forth again, so she but hung over it as close as she might. Then she saw the witch draw out of her girdle that sharp little knife which Birdalone had seen raised against her own throat; and then the witch bared her arm, and pricked it till the blood sprang from that barren white skin; thereat she stood up, and went to the bows of the craft and hung over them, and drew her arm to and fro over the stem to bloody it; and went thereafter to the stern, and took blood into her right hand and passed it over the place of the steerage (for there was no rudder), and came back and sat down on the thwart again; and, so far as Birdalone might see, busied herself in staunching the little wound on her arm. Then deemed Birdalone that

she knew what manner of paint was that which had made the rusty smears which she had seen on the boat by daylight.

But now as the witch sat there, a harsh voice began to stir in her throat, and then words came out of her, and she sang in a crow's croak:

The red raven-wine now
Hast thou drunk, stern and bow;
Then wake and awake
And the wonted way take!
The way of the Wender forth over the flood,
For the will of the Sender is blent with the blood.

Therewithal began the boat to stir, and anon it glided forth out of the creek into the waters of the lake, and the light of the lantern died, and it was but a minute ere Birdalone lost all sight of it. She abode a little longer, lest perchance boat and witch might come back on her hands, and then turned and went swiftly back again. She would have drawn off her ring straightway, but the thought came on her, that she had seen the witch depart in her second semblance; how if she were abiding her at home in her wonted skin? So she came to the house even as she was, and opened the door, and looked in, quaking; but there was no image of a child of Adam therein, and no living thing, save the cat drowsing before the fire; wherefore Birdalone took the ring from her finger and went to the hearth, and stirred up the cat with her foot till he arose and fell to rubbing himself against her legs, and she was fain of him.

Thereafter she made her ring fast to her smock again, and set the smock under her pillow as her wont was, and betook herself to bed, and fell asleep sweetly, leaving all troublous thoughts for the morrow; and that the more as she was free of the witch-wife for that night at least.

CHAPTER XVI. BIRDALONE MEETETH HABUNDIA AGAIN; AND LEARNETH HER FIRST WISDOM OF HER.

WHEN morning was, Birdalone arose, and longed sore to go into the wood to seek Habundia again, but durst not, lest the witch-wife should come to hand again earlier than might be looked for. So she abode quiet and did what was toward near about the house. All that day the witch came not back, nor the next; but the morrow thereafter, when Birdalone arose, she found the wonted aspect of her mistress in the wonted place, who, when she saw the maiden, greeted her, and was somewhat blithe with her; and Birdalone would have asked her leave to go to the wood, but she trusted little in her unwonted soft mood; which yet lasted so long that on the third day she herself bade Birdalone go take her pleasure in the wood, and bear back with her what of venison she might.

Forthwith went Birdalone as glad as might be, and met her friend at the Oak of Tryst, and told her closely how all had betid; and Habundia said: Here, then, thou hast learned how to sail the lake. But hast thou learned enough to try the adventure and not to fail? Even so I deem, said Birdalone; but this I would say, that meseemeth it better that I follow the witch down to the boat one more time at least; for this first time it was dark; and moreover shall I not be surer of the spell if I hear it said oftener, lest it be not ever the same words?

What sayest thou? She said: Thou art right herein, and, since the adventure may not be tried till next June is at hand, there is time enough and to spare. And now for this hour that is we need talk no more of it. Only, my sweet, I beseech thee be wary; and above all suffer not the witch-wife to set eye or hand on the ring. Truly mine heart oft aches sorely for thy peril; for therein the image of thee abideth rather as of my daughter than my friend. Yea, now thou laughest, but kindly, so that the sound of thy laughter is as sweet music. But know that though thou art but a young maiden, and I in all wise like unto thee of aspect, yet have I dwelt many and many a year upon the earth, and much wisdom have learned. Trowest thou me?

Yea, yea, said Birdalone, with all my heart. Then she hung her head a while and kept silence, and thereafter looked up and spake: I would ask thee a thing and crave somewhat of thee, as if thou wert verily my mother; wilt thou grant it me? Yea, surely, child, said Habundia. Said Birdalone: This it is then, that thou wilt learn me of thy wisdom. Habundia smiled full kindly on her, and said: This of all things I would have had thee ask; and this day and now shall we begin to open the book of the earth before thee. For therein is mine heritage and my dominion. Sit by me, child, and hearken!

So the maiden sat down by her likeness under the oak, and began to learn her lesson. Forsooth forgotten is the wisdom, though the tale of its learning abideth, wherefore nought may we tell thereof.

When it was done, Birdalone kissed her wood-mother and said: This is now the best day of my life, this and the day when first I saw thee. I will come hither now many times before the day of my departure. Yea, but, sweet child, said Habundia, beware of the witch and her cruelty; I fear me she shall yet be grim toward thee. So will I be wary, said Birdalone, but I will venture some little peril of pain but if thou forbid me, mother. And I pray thee by thy love to forbid me not. And this I pray thee the more, because after one of these grim times then mostly doth she meddle the less with me for a while, wherefore I shall be the freer to come hither. Habundia kissed her and embraced her, and said: Valiant art thou for a young maiden, my child, and I would not refrain thee more than a father would refrain his young son from the strokes of the tilt-yard. But I pray thee to forget not my love, and my sorrow for thy grief.

Therewith they sundered, and it was drawing toward evening. Birdalone sought catch, and brought home venison to the dame, who was yet blithe with her, and spake that evening as she eyed her: I cannot tell how it is, but thou seemest changed unto me, and lookest more towards thy womanhood than even yesterday. I mean the face of thee, for wert thou stripped, lean enough I should see thee, doubtless. But now look to it, I beseech thee, to be both deft and obedient, so that I may be as kind to thee as I would be, and kinder than I have been heretofore.

CHAPTER XVII. THE PASSING OF THE YEAR INTO WINTER.

WORE the days now, till on a night of October, toward the end thereof, the witch went a-night-tide to the Sending Boat, and Birdalone followed her as erst. This time the night was wild and windy, but the moon was high aloft and big, and all cloud save a few flecks was blown from off the heavens; so that the night was as light as could be; and even at the tree-hung creek it was easy to see all that was done. And so it was that the witch did and spake in all wise as she did before.

Another time, when November was well-nigh out, the dame arose for her lake-faring; but this night the snow lay deep betwixt house and water, and Birdalone thought that it would scarce do to follow. Forsooth she knew not whether her feet would the less leave their print in the snow because they were not to be seen. When she asked Habundia thereof, she laughed and said: Once more thou hast been wise, my child, for though it had been no harder to put this might into thy ring, that whoso wore it should not touch the ground, yet it hath not been done.

It must be told, that in this while Birdalone went oft to the Trysting Tree, and called on her mother (as now she called her) to come to her, and ever more and more of wisdom she won thereby. Though the witch was oft surly with her, and spared not her girding, yet, the needful work done, she

meddled little with her. But on a day she straightly banned her the wood, and Birdalone went notwithstanding, and when she was there with the wood-mother nought she told her thereof, but was blithe and merry beyond her wont. She came back home thereafter empty handed, and stepped into the chamber proudly and with bright eyes and flushed cheeks, though she looked for nought save chastisement; yea, it might be even the skin-changing. Forsooth the witch was sitting crouched in her chair with her hands on the elbows and her head thrust forward, like a wild beast at point to spring; but when her eye fell on Birdalone, she faltered and drew back into herself again, and muttered somewhat unheard; but to Birdalone spake nought of good or bad.

Now was winter-tide upon them, when there was nought to do in field and acre, and but a little in the byre. In years bygone, and even in the last one, the witch had not spared Birdalone toil any the more, but had made errands for her amidst the snow and biting winds, or over the lake when it was laid with ice. But now she bade her to nought save what she had a will to; whereby she lost but little, whereas Birdalone was well willing to strive against wind and weather and the roughness of the winter earth, and overcome if she might, so that all were well done that had to be done about the stead.

Still did the witch give her hard words and rail at her for the most part, but from the teeth outward only, and because she was wont thereto. In-

wardly indeed she began to fear Birdalone, and deemed that she would one day have the mastery; and this led her into fierce and restless moods; so that she would sit staring at the maiden's beauty handling her knife withal, and scarce able to forbear her. And in such a mood she once made occasion to chastise her as her wont had been erst, and looked to see Birdalone rebel against her; but it fell out otherwise, for Birdalone submitted herself to her meekly and with a cheerful countenance. And this also was a terror to the witch, who deemed, as indeed it was, that the purpose was growing in her thrall. So from that time she meddled with her no more. All this while, as may be thought, Birdalone went yet oftener to the Oak of Tryst, despite frost and snow and wind, and gat much lore of her wood-mother, and learned wisdom abundantly. And her days were happy.

CHAPTER XVIII. OF SPRING-TIDE AND THE MIND OF BIRDALONE.

NOW was the winter gone and the spring-tide come again, and with the blossoming of the earth blossomed Birdalone also. Nought sweeter of flesh might she be than erst, but there was now a new majesty grown into her beauty; her limbs were rounded, her body fulfilled, her skin sleeked and whitened; and if any mother's son had beheld her feet as they trod the meadow besprinkled with saffron and daffodil, ill had it gone with him were he gainsaid the kisses of them, though for the kissing had he fared the worse belike.

That spring-tide, amidst of April, she followed the witch-wife down to the Sending Boat for the third time; and there went everything as erst, and she deemed now that the lesson was well learned, and that she was well-nigh as wise as the witch herself therein.

But the day after she went about somewhat pensive, as though a troublous thought were on her; and when, three days thereafter, she met the wood-mother, she spake to her even as they parted, and said: Mother, much wisdom hast thou learned me, and now this at the last withal, that hitherto there has been shame in my life; and now fain were I to be done with it. Fair child, said Habundia, little is the shame though this woman hath had the upper hand of thee and hath used thee cruelly: how mightest thou, a child, strive with her? But

now I see and know that there is an end of that; that she feareth thee now, and will never again raise a hand against thee save thou fall wholly into her power; as thou shalt not, my child. Be comforted then for what is gone by! Nay, mother, said Birdalone, it is not that which troubleth me; for, as thou sayest, what else might I do? But thy wisdom which thou hast set in my heart hath learned me that for these last months I have been meeting guile with guile and lies with lies. And now will I do so no more, lest I become a guileful woman, with nought good in me save the fairness of my body. Wherefore hearken, sweet mother! What is done, is done; but when it cometh to the day, which is speedily drawing nigh, that I must part from thee, it may be for a long while, then will I not fare to the Sending Boat by night and cloud and with hidden head, but will walk thither in broad day, and let that befall which must befall.

Changed then Habundia's face and became haggard and woeful, and she cried out: O if I could but weep, as ye children of Adam! O my grief and sorrow! Child, child! then will betide that falling into her hands which I spake of e'en now; and then shall this wretch, this servant of evil, assuredly slay thee there and then, or will keep thee to torment thee till thy life be but a slow death. Nay, nay, do as I should do, and fare with hidden head, and my ring on thy finger. Or else, O child, how wilt thou hurt me!

Birdalone wept; but presently she fell to caressing the mother's hand, and said: This is thy doing,

wherein thou hast made me wise. Yet fear not: for I deem that the witch-wife will not slay me, whereas she looketh to have some gain of me; moreover, in the evil of her heart is mingled some love toward me, whereof, as erst I told thee, I have a morsel of compassion. Mother, she will not slay me; and I say that she shall not torment me, for I will compel her to slay me else. It is my mind that she will let me go. Said the mother: Yea, may-happen, yet but as a bird with a string to its leg. If it be so, said Birdalone, then let my luck prevail over her guile; as well it may be, since I have known thee, O wise mother!

The wood-wife hung her head and spake nought for a while; then she said: I see that thou wilt have it so, and that there is something in thine heart which we, who are not children of Adam, may not understand; yet once wert thou more like unto us. Now all I may say is, that thou must rule in this matter, and that I am sad.

Then she looked down again and presently raised a brighter face, and said: Belike all shall be better than I thought. Then she kissed Birdalone and they parted for that time.

CHAPTER XIX. THEY BID FAREWELL, BIRDALONE AND THE WOOD-MOTHER.

NOW April was gone, and May was come with the thorn a-blossoming, and there was Birdalone waxing still in loveliness. And now the witch had left all girding at her even, and spake to her but little, save when she needs must. But to Birdalone it seemed that she watched her exceeding closely.

Birdalone went oft to the wood, and learned yet more of lore: but of the matter of the Departure, how it was to be gone about they spake no more, and great was the love betwixt them.

At last when May was worn nigh to June came Birdalone to the Oak of Tryst, and found the wood-mother there; and when they had talked a while, but ever from the teeth out, spake Habundia: Though thou be now the wiser of us two maybe, yet have I wisdom to wot that this is the hour of our sundering, and that to-morrow thou wilt try the adventure of the Sending Boat: is it not so? Yea, mother, said Birdalone; I bid thee farewell now: woe is me therefor! Said Habundia: And thou wilt deliver thyself into the hands of the witch, wilt thou, as thou saidst that other day? Quoth Birdalone: Is it not wisdom, dear mother, if I trust in my goodhap? Alas, said the mother, it may be so when all is said. But O my sad heart! and how I fear for thee!

My mother, my mother! said Birdalone, that I should make the days grievous unto thee! and thou who hast made my days so joyous! But now canst thou not say of thy wisdom that we shall meet again?

The wood-woman sat down, and let her head fall over her knees, and was silent a long while; then she rose up and stood before Birdalone, and said: Yea, we shall meet again, howsoever it may be. Let us depart with that sweet word in the air between us. Yet first thou shalt give me a tress of thine hair, as I did to thee when first we met; for by means of it may I know to-morrow how thou hast sped.

Even so did Birdalone, and this was the end of their talk, save broken words of lamentation as they said farewell. And therewith for that while they sundered.

CHAPTER XX. OF BIRDALONE AND THE SENDING BOAT.

BIRDALONE woke up in the morning, and arose and clad herself, and she saw not the witch-wife in the chamber, though her bed looked as if it had been slept in. Birdalone accounted little thereof, whereas the dame would oft go on one errand or another much betimes in the morning. Yet was she somewhat glad, for she was nowise wishful for a wrangle with her. Withal, despite her valiancy, as may well be thought, she was all a-flutter with hopes and fears, and must needs refrain her body from overmuch quaking and restlessness if she might.

Now she mingled the tress of the wood-mother's hair with her own hair, but deemed it nought perilous to leave the ring yet sewn to her smock: she set some deal of bread and flesh in her scrip, lest her voyage should be long, and then all simply stepped over the threshold of the House of her Captivity.

She went straight to the strand aforesaid, seeing nought of the witch-wife by the way; and when she came there, was about to turn straightway to her left hand down to the creek, when it came into her mind that she would first swim over to Green Eyot for this last of times. For the eyot indeed she loved, and deemed it her own, since never had her evil dream, the witch, set foot thereon. Moreover, she said to herself that the cool lake would allay the fever of her blood, and make her flesh firmer

and less timorous for the adventure. And again, that if the witch should see her from afar, as she could scarce fail to do, she would deem the maiden was about her wonted morning swimming, and would be the less like to spy on her.

So now, when she had let her garments slip from off her on to the sand close to the water's edge, she stood a while, with her feet scarce covered by the little ripple of the bight, to be a token of safety to her mistress. To say sooth, now it was come so nigh to the deed, she shrank aback a little, and was fain to dally with the time, and, if it might be, thrust something of no import betwixt her and the terror of the last moment.

Now she took the water, and rowed strongly with her lovely limbs till she came to the eyot, and there she went aland, and visited every place which had been kind to her; and kissed the trees and flowers that had solaced her, and once more drew the birds and rabbits to sport with her; till suddenly it came into her head that the time was wearing overfast. Then she ran down to the water and plunged in, and swam over to the strand as fast as she might, and came aland there, thinking of nothing less than what had befallen.

For lo! when she looked around for her raiment and her scrip, it was nowhere to be seen; straightway then it came into her mind, as in one flash, that this was the witch's work; that she had divined this deed of the flight, and had watched her, and taken the occasion of her nakedness and absence that she might draw her back to the House

of Captivity. And this the more as the precious ring was sewn to Birdalone's smock, and the witch would have found it there when she handled the raiment.

Birdalone wasted no time in seeking for the lost; she looked down on to the smooth sand, and saw there footprints which were not her own, and all those went straight back home to the house. Then she turned, and for one moment of time looked up toward the house, and saw plainly the witch come out adoors, and the sun flashed from something bright in her hand.

Then indeed she made no stay, but set off running at her swiftest along the water-side toward the creek and the Sending Boat. As is aforesaid she was as fleet-foot as a deer, so but in a little space of time she had come to the creek, and leapt into the boat, panting and breathless. She turned and looked hastily along the path her feet had just worn, and deemed she saw a fluttering and flashing coming along it, but some way off; yet was not sure, for her eyes were dizzy with the swiftness of her flight and the hot sun and the hurry of her heart. Then she looked about a moment confusedly, for she called to mind that in her nakedness she had neither knife, nor scissors, nor bodkin to let her blood withal. But even therewith close to hand she saw hanging down a stem of half-dead briar-rose with big thorns upon it; she hastily tore off a length thereof and scratched her left arm till the blood flowed, and stepped lightly first to stem and then to stern, and besmeared them there-

with. Then she sat down on the thwart and cried aloud:

The red raven-wine now
Hast thou drunk, stern and bow;
Then wake and awake
And the wonted way take!
The way of the Wender forth over the flood,
For the will of the Sender is blent with the blood.

Scarce had she time to wonder if the boat would obey her spell ere it began to stir beneath her, and then glided out into the lake and took its way over the summer ripple, going betwixt Green Eyot and the mainland, as if to weather the western ness of the eyot: and it went not a stonecast from the shore of the said mainland.

Hither to meet it now cometh the witch, running along the bank, her skirts flying wild about her, and a heavy short-sword gleaming in her hand. Her furious running she stayed over against the boat, and cried out in a voice broken for lack of breath:

Back over the flood
To the house by the wood!
Back unto thy rest
In the alder nest!
For the blood of the Sender lies warm on thy bow,
And the heart of the Wender is weary as now.

But she saw that the Sending Boat heeded her words nothing, whereas it was not her blood that had awakened it, but Birdalone's. Then cried out the witch: O child, child! say the spell and come back to me! to me, who have reared thee and loved thee and hoped in thee! O come back!

But how should Birdalone heed her prayer? She saw the sax; and withal had her heart forgotten, her flesh might well remember. She sat still, nor so much as turned her head toward the witch-wife.

Then came wild yelling words from the witch's mouth, and she cried: Go then, naked and outcast! Go then, naked fool! and come back hither after thou hast been under the hands of the pitiless! Ah, it had been better for thee had I slain thee! And therewith she whirled the sax over her head and cast it at Birdalone. But now had the boat turned its head toward the ness of Green Eyot and was swiftly departing, so that Birdalone but half heard the last words of the witch-wife, and the sax fell flashing into the water far astern.

There the witch stood tossing her arms and screaming, wordless; but no more of her saw Birdalone, for the boat came round about the ness of Green Eyot, and there lay the Great Water under the summer heavens all wide and landless before her. And it was now noon of day.

Here ends the First Part of the Water of the Wondrous Isles, which is called Of the House of Captivity. And now begins the Second Part, which is called Of the Wondrous Isles.

THE WATER OF THE WONDROUS ISLES. THE SECOND PART: OF THE WONDROUS ISLES.

CHAPTER I. THE FIRST ISLE.

SO glided Birdalone over the lake and was come forth from the House of Captivity; it might well be that she was but swimming unto death; naked as she was, fireless, foodless, and helpless, at the mercy of mere sorcery. Yet she called to mind the word of the wood-mother that they should meet again, and took heart thereby; and she was glad in that she had had her will, and shaken off the guile and thraldom of the witch. Much she thought of the wood-mother, and loved her, and wondered had she yet sought into and seen her welfare by the burning of a hair of that tress of hers; and therewith she looked on that tress of Habundia's hair and kissed it.

All day the Sending Boat sped on, and she saw no land and nought to tell of. It was but wave and sky and the familiar fowl of the lake, as coot, and mallard, and heron, and now and then a swift wood-dove going her ways from shore to shore; two gerfalcons she saw also, an osprey, and a great ern on his errand high up aloft.

Birdalone waked in her loneliness till the day was spent, and somewhat worn of the night; then she fell asleep for weariness; but so it was, that before dusk she had deemed that a blue cloud lay before her in the offing which moved not.

She slept the short night through, and was awakened by the boat smiting against something, and when her eyes opened she saw that she was come aland and that the sun was just risen. She stood up, and for the first minute wondered where she was, and she beheld her nakedness and knew not what it meant; then she loosened her hair, and shook its abundance all about her, and thereafter she turned her eyes on this new land and saw that it was fair and goodly. The flowery grass came down to the very water, and first was a fair meadow-land besprinkled with big ancient trees; thence arose slopes of vineyard, and orchard and garden; and, looking down on all, was a great White House, carven and glorious. A little air of wind had awakened with the sunrise, and bore the garden sweetness down to her; and warm it was after the chill of the wide water. No other land could she see when she looked lakeward thence.

She stepped ashore, and stood ankle-deep in the sweet grass, and looked about her for a while, and saw no shape of man astir. She was yet weary, and stiff with abiding so long amongst the hard ribs of the boat, so she laid herself down on the grass, and its softness solaced her; and presently she fell asleep again.

CHAPTER II. BIRDALONE FALLETH IN WITH NEW FRIENDS.

WHEN she next awoke, the sun was not yet high, and the morning young, yet she stood upon her feet much refreshed by that short slumber. She turned toward the hill and the gay house, and saw one coming over the meadow to her, a woman to wit, in a shining golden gown, and as she drew nigh Birdalone could see that she was young and fair, tall, white-skinned and hazel-eyed, with long red hair dancing all about her as she tripped lightly and merrily over the greensward.

Now she comes up to Birdalone with wonder in her eyes, and greets her kindly, and asked her of her name, and Birdalone told it all simply; and the new-comer said: What errand hast thou hither, that thou art come thus naked and alone in this ill-omened ferry? Birdalone trembled at her words, though she spake kindly to her, and she said: It is a long story, but fate drave me thereto, and misery, and I knew not whither I was bound. But is there no welcome for me in this lovely land? I lack not deftness wholly; and I will be a servant of servants, and ask no better if it must be so. Said the new-comer: Unto that mayst thou come, but sore will be thy servitude. I fear me thy welcome here may be but evil. Said Birdalone: Wilt thou not tell me how so? Quoth that lady: We know thy ferry here, that it is the craft wherein cometh hither now and again the sister of our lady the Queen, into whose realm thou art now come,

and who liveth up in the white palace yonder, and whom we serve. And meseems thou wilt not have come hither by her leave, or thou wouldst be in other guise than this; so that belike thou wilt be the runaway of thy mistress. Wherefore I fear that thou wilt be sent back to thy said mistress after a while, and that that while will be grievous to thee, body and soul.

Birdalone's heart sank, and she was pale and trembling; but she said: O dear lady, might I then depart as I have come hither, without the wotting of this Queen! after thou hast given me a morsel of bread, for I am hungry. Said the gold-clad one, looking on her pitifully: Nay, maiden, I cannot choose but bring thee before our mistress, whereas most like she hath already seen thee from above there. For she is far-sighted beyond the wont of folk who be more manlike. But as for the bread, see thou! I have brought a manchet in my pouch, and cheese withal, as I came hurrying; for I thought, she will be hungry. And she reached the victual out to her. And Birdalone took it and kissed the golden lady's hands, and she might not refrain her tears, but wept as she ate.

Meanwhile the golden lady spake unto her and said: Nevertheless, thou poor maiden, somewhat may be done for thine helping, and I will presently speak to my sisters thereon, who are, both of them, wiser than I. Sisters by blood are we not, but by love and fellowship. And I doubt not but that as we go up into the house we shall happen upon them in the garden. But now I look upon thee, how fair a woman art thou!

Thou art kind and friendly, said Birdalone, smiling amidst of her tears, might I know by what name to call so dear a woman? Thou shalt call me Aurea, said the other; and my next sister is Viridis, and the third, Atra; for that is according to the hues of our raiment, and other names we have not now. And lo! here cometh Viridis over the meadow.

Birdalone looked, and saw a woman coming toward them clad all in green, with a rose-wreath on her head. And she drew nigh, and greeted Birdalone kindly, and she also was a very beauteous woman; not great of body, whereas Aurea was tall and big-made, though excellently shapen. Light brown and goodly waved of hair was Viridis, her eyes brown, and rather long than great; her lips full and ruddy, her cheeks soft and sweet and smooth, and as rosy-tinted pearl; her hands small and delicate of fashion; her whole body soft-shapen as an egg; a kind, wheedling look her face bore.

When she had looked a while on Birdalone, she kissed her, and said: I would thou wert happier, for thou art beauteous, and all but the evil must love thee. Therewith she drew a cate from her pouch, and said: Eat somewhat, for thou wilt be hungry; and let us go meet our other sister, who is wiser than we.

So they went, all three of them, and came from off the meadow on to the garden-slopes, and at the entry thereof was come Atra to meet them; she was clad all in black, a tall, slim woman, with the grace of the willow-bough in the wind, with dark

plenteous hair and grey hawk-eyes; her skin privet-white, with but little red in her cheeks. She also greeted Birdalone kindly, but sadly withal. She gave her strawberries to eat laid on a big kale-blade; and she said: Sisters, here are we hidden by the trees, and cannot be seen from the house; therefore we may sit here for a minute or two, while we talk together as to what may perchance be done for the helping of this unhappy maiden, who is so fair and lovely, and hath strayed into so ugly a trap. Then she said to Birdalone: Thou must know, poor wanderer, that this Queen, our mistress, who is sister to the Witch Under the Wood, is big and strong, well-made, and white-skinned, so that she deems herself a Queen of all beauty: keen-eyed is she to see a fly where others would see nought smaller than a coney; fine-eared withal; wise in wizardry; not altogether dull-witted, though she be proud, and crueller than the cruellest. But herein she faileth, that her memory is of the shortest for matters of the passing hour, albeit she remembers her spells and witch-songs over well. But other matters will scarce abide in her head for four and twenty hours. Wherefore, sisters, if we may keep this maiden out of her sight (after she hath seen her and given doom upon her) till the dead of to-morrow night, we may perchance do some good for her; and it is in my mind that then she may do good for us also.

Now they rejoiced in this word of Atra the wise; and Atra prayed Birdalone to tell them somewhat more of her story; and she told them much; but,

whyso it were, she said nought concerning the wood-wife, whose outward semblance was the same as hers. Then they pitied her, and caressed her; but Atra said: We must tarry here no more, but go straight up to the lady, or maybe we shall lose all.

So they went their ways and came into the pleasance, and trod the sweet greensward betwixt the garland flowers and the beauteous trees; which now indeed, though Birdalone saw them all clear and over-clear, were become nought to her. Those three also spake gently to her, and now and then asked her somewhat, as if to show her that she was one of themselves; but she spake not, or answered at random, and to say sooth scarce heard their words: forsooth she was now become heart-sick, and was half dead for fear; and her nakedness, which would have troubled her little across the water, was now grown a shame and a terror unto her, and every deal of her body quivered with the anguish thereof.

CHAPTER III. BIRDALONE IS BROUGHT BEFORE THE WITCH-WIFE'S SISTER.

SO came they at last to the very house, and whereas it stood high on the bent, a great stair or perron of stone went up to it, and was of much majesty. They went through the porch, which was pillared and lovely, and came into a great hall most nobly builded, and at the other end thereof, on a golden throne raised upon a dais, sat a big woman clad in red scarlet. The three damsels led Birdalone to some four paces of the great lady, and then stood away from her, and left her standing there alone, the scarlet-clad woman before her; on the right and the left the tall pillars going up gleaming toward the roof, and about her feet the dark polished pavement, with the wallowing of strange beasts and great serpents and dragons all done on the coal-blue ground.

When she was so left alone, at first she tottered, and went nigh to falling; but then came back some little heart to her, as she said to herself that now she should verily die once for all, and that no long while would be the passing from life into death. She looked up and beheld the lady-witch, that she was somewhat like to her sister, white-skinned and of plenteous golden-hair as was she, but younger of aspect, and nowise so ill-looked as that other had now become; for somewhat well-shapen of body she was; but her face forbidding; her lower lip thrust out, her cheeks flaggy and

drooping, her eyes little more than half open; to be short, a face both proud, foolish, and cruel; terrible indeed, sitting in judgment in that place on a shrinking naked creature.

Now she spake; and if there were no majesty or solemnity in the voice, there was ugly glee and malice therein; but she said to those damsels: Is this the woman that my keen eyes beheld come aland from my sister's Sending Boat e'en now? Aurea knelt on one knee, and said: Yea, so please you, my lady.

Then said the witch: Ho thou! Wilt thou plead some errand hither from my sister? Dost thou deem me so witless as not to know that if she had sent thee hither thou wouldst not have come in this plight? Nay, I know; thou hast stolen thyself from her: thou art a thief, and as a thief shalt thou be dealt with.

Spake Birdalone in a clear voice: No errand do I feign from thy sister, lady: when I could bear my life there no longer, I took occasion to flee from her: this is all the tale. Yet once and again it hath been in my mind that it was thy sister who stole me from them that loved me.

Hah, thrall! said the lady, thou art bold; thou art over-bold, thou naked wretch, to bandy words with me. What heed I thy tale now thou art under my hand? Her voice was cold rather than fierce, yet was there the poison of malice therein. But Birdalone spake: If I be bold, lady, it is because I see that I have come into the House of Death. The dying may well be bold.

The House of Death! cried the stupid lady; and wilt thou call my noble house the House of Death? Now art thou no longer bold, stripped thrall, but impudent.

Scorn rose into Birdalone's heart at this word, but she refrained her, and spake: I meant that I have stirred the wrath in thee, and that thou wilt slay me therefor; and that it availeth not to crave mercy of thee.

Laughed the lady: Thou art a fool, thrall, said she; if a sparrow fled hither from my sister, I should not wring its neck, but keep it for her. So shall I do with thee. I shall not slay thee, and so destroy my sister's chattel; nor shall I spoil thee, and spoil her possession. I shall send thee back unto her, the stolen thrall in the stolen boat, when I have learned thee a lesson here. Forsooth it was for that cause meseemeth that she let thee slip through her fingers, for she is wise enough to have stayed thee from this holiday had she willed it. But she is tender-hearted, and kind, and soft, and might well deem that if thy chastisement were done to her hand here, it were better done than by her mercy. Now, thrall, I have spoken enough to thee, or more than enough: get thee back out of earshot!

CHAPTER IV. OF THE WITCH'S PRISON IN THE WAILING-TOWER.

BIRDALONE did as she was bidden, and the witch called unto her Atra, who came and stood humbly on the footpace beside her, and held converse with her mistress a while. Then she went backward from her a little, and then came to Birdalone, and in a somewhat harsh voice bade her come with her. Birdalone followed her, quaking, and they came out of the hall and into a long passage, which led to a wide stair winding round a newel; and all was builded exceeding fair, had Birdalone's heart suffered her eyes to see it; but her flesh was weak, and quaked before the torment to come, so that her knees well-nigh failed her.

But now Atra lays a hand kindly on her shoulder and stays her, and says: Now meseems the walls of the Wailing-Tower, for so it hight, have no ears to hear, and we may talk together. Wottest thou why I have brought thee hither? Said Birdalone in a faint voice: Hast thou been bidden to whip me? And if I had been so bidden, dear maiden, said Atra laughing, nowise would I do it. Hold up thine heart! For all hath gone well so far, and now meseems betwixt us three we shall save thee.

Birdalone's spirit came back to her at that word, and she put her hands to her face and fell a-weeping. But Atra was kind to her and made much of her; and she kissed her and wiped her tears, and Birdalone smiled again amidst her sobs, and she thanked Atra; who said to her: First of all I

must tell thee that I am taking thee to prison by the witch's bidding. Yea, said Birdalone, and what is prison? Said Atra: A prison is a grim place where poor folk who have done that which pleaseth not rich folk are shut up, that they may be grieved and tormented by not being able to fare abroad, or go where they would; and by suffering whatsoever their masters may lay upon them, as darkness, and cold, and hunger, and stripes. Somewhat so, or worse, our lady would have it for thee; but so would not we. Therefore for thee shall this prison be a place where thou shalt be safe till we may bring thee forth when the night hath worn towards its ending. For she will have forgotten thee by to-morrow; and this she knoweth; wherefore just now, when thou stoodest out of earshot, she was bidding me, amongst other matters, to bring thee before her to-morrow morning, and tell her the tale of thee, that she might call it to mind then what she had will to this morning.

Yea, said Birdalone, but will she not remember that she hath given thee a charge concerning me? But little thereof, said Atra, and with a few words I may easily confuse her memory so that speech thereon will fail her. Keep up thine heart, sweetling; but let us up this stair now forthwith, for I were fain to have thee hid away in this prison, and then will I down to her and tell her that thou art lying therein in all misery and terror, lest it come into her head to send for thee ere her memory is grown dim.

Again did Birdalone take heart, and they hastened a long way up the stair, till Atra stayed at

last at a door all done with iron, endlong and overthwart. Then she took a leash of keys from her girdle, one big and two little, and set the big one in the lock and turned it, and shoved the heavy door and entered thereby a chamber four-square and vaulted; and the vault was upheld by a pillar of red marble, wherein, somewhat higher than a man's head, were set stanchions of latten, that could be clasped and unclasped. This chamber was in a way goodly, but yet grim to look on; for the walls were all of black ashlar stone close-jointed, and the floor black also, but of marble polished so wholly that it was as dark water, and gave back the image of Birdalone's dear feet and legs as she went thereon. The windows were not small, and the chamber was light in every corner because of them, but they were so high up under the vaulting that none might see thereout aught save the heavens. There was nought in the chamber save a narrow bench of oak and three stools of the same, a great and stately carven chair dight with cushions of purple and gold, and in one corner a big oaken coffer.

Now spake Atra: This is our lady's prison, and I fear me we cannot make it soft for thee, dear stranger. Yea, I must tell thee (and she reddened therewith) that it is part of my charge to set thee in irons. Birdalone smiled on her, and was over weary to ask what that meant, though she knew not. But Atra went to the big coffer and opened it and thrust in her hands, and there was a jangling therewith, and when she turned about to Birdalone again she had iron chains in her hands, and she

said: This shameth me, dear friend; yet if thou wouldst wear them it might be well, for she may have a mind to go visit her prison, and if she find thee there unshackled she shall be wroth, and oftenest her wrath hath a whip in its hand. And these are the lightest that I might find.

Birdalone smiled again, and spake not, for she was very weary, and Atra did the irons on her wrists and her ankles; and said thereafter: Yet bear in mind that it is a friend that hath the key of these things. And now I will go away for a little, but I shall be on thine errands; for first I shall tell the mistress that thou art lying here shackled and in all wanhope; and next, by the will and command of her, I am to see that thou be well fed and nourished to-day that thou mayst be the stronger for to-morrow. Now if I may give thee rede, it is that thou forbear to open the coffer yonder; for ugly things shalt thou find there, and that may dishearten thee again.

Therewith she kissed her kindly on the cheek and went her ways, and the great key turned in the lock behind her.

There then was Birdalone left to herself; and she was over weary even to weep; true it is that she made a step or two towards the coffer, but refrained her, and took two of the pillows from the great chair and turned aside into the other corner, her chains jingling as she went. There she laid herself down, and nestled into the very wall-nook, and presently fell asleep, and slumbered dreamlessly and sweetly a long while.

CHAPTER V. THEY FEAST IN THE WITCH'S PRISON.

BIRDALONE was awakened by the sound of the key in the lock, and the door opened, and there was Atra bearing dishes and platters, and behind her Viridis with the like gear, and beakers and a flagon to boot, and both they were smiling and merry.

Birdalone's heart leapt up to meet them, and in especial was she gladdened by the coming of Viridis, who had seemed to be the kindest of them all.

Viridis spake: Now is come the meat for the dear sister, and it is time, for surely thou art famished, and it is now long past high noon. Do off her irons, Atra. Said Atra: Maybe it were well to let the fetters abide on her ankles, lest the mistress should come; but for the wrists, reach out thine hands, wayfarer. So did Birdalone, and Atra laid her things on the ground, and unlocked the hand-shackles, and did them off: and meanwhile Viridis spread forth the banquet, partly on the floor, and partly on that ill-omened coffer. Then she went up to Birdalone and kissed her, and said: Now shalt thou sit in our lady's throne, and we shall serve thee, and thou shalt deem thee a great one.

Nought else would they have, and Birdalone laid her nakedness on the purple cushions, and then they fell all three to the feast. The victual was both plenteous and dainty, of venison and fowl, and cream and fruits and sweetmeats, and good wine they had withal: never had Birdalone feasted in like manner,

and the heart came back unto her, and her cheeks grew rosy and her eyes glittered. But she said: How if your lady were to come upon us here, and we so merry? Said Atra: Out of the chair must thou when thou hearest the key in the lock, and then is all well, and she would have nought against us; for she herself bade us, and me in special, to keep thee company here, and talk with thee; and Aurea also would have been here, but that she is serving the lady as now. Hath she then some pity on me, said Birdalone, that she hath bidden thee do by me what is most to my pleasure?

Laughed Viridis thereat, and Atra said: She hath no pity, nor ever shall have; but so hard of heart is she, that she may not deem that we could love thee, a stranger, and unhappy, who can serve us in nowise; so she feareth not the abatement of thy grief from any compassion of us. Rather she hath sent us, and me in especial, not to comfort thee, but to grieve thee by words; for she biddeth me tell thee fair tales, forsooth, of what to-morrow shall be to thee, and the day after; and of how she shall begin on thee, and what shall follow the beginning, and what thou mayst look for after that. For by all this she deemeth to lower thy pride and abate thy valour, and to make every moment of to-day a terror to thy flesh and thy soul, so that thereby thou mayest thole the bitterness twice over. Such is her pity for thee! And yet belike this cruelty hath saved thee, for but for that she had not refrained her from thee to-day, and to-morrow thou shalt be far away from her.

Meanwhile, said Viridis, in her soft sweet voice, none of all these things will we talk over with thee, but things comfortable and kind; and we will tell each to each of our story. Will we not, Atra? Yea, verily, said she.

Birdalone looked upon them and said: Wondrous is your compassion and loving-kindness unto me, and scarce do I know how to bear the burden thereof. But tell me one thing truly; will ye not suffer in my place when this witch cometh to know that ye have stolen me away from her?

Nay, said Atra, I have told thee that by tomorrow she will have altogether, or at least almost, forgotten thee and thy coming hither. Moreover, she is foreseeing, and hath come to know that if she raise a hand against any of us three, it will lead her to her bane, save it be for heavy guilt clearly proven against us. Forsooth, in the earlier days of our captivity such a guilt we fell into, and did not wholly escape, as Viridis can bear me witness. But we are now grown wiser, and know our mistress better, and will give her no such joy.

Viridis cast her eyes down at those words and Atra's smile, and turned red and then pale, and Birdalone looked on her wondering what ailed her; then she said: Do ye sisters work in the field and the garden? I mean at milking the kine and the goats, and digging the earth, and sowing and reaping, and the like. Nay, said Atra; either our mistress, or someone else who is of marvellous might, hath so ordained, that here everything waxeth of itself without tillage, or sowing or reaping,

or any kind of tending; and whatso we need of other matters the mistress taketh it for us from out of her Wonder-coffer, or suffereth us to take it for ourselves. For thou must know that this land is one of the Isles of the Lake, and is called the Isle of Increase Unsought.

Meseemeth then, said Birdalone, were the mistress of you to gainsay you the gifts of the Wonder-coffer, ye were undone. Yea, verily, said Atra; then would be but the fruits of the earth and the wild creatures for our avail, and these, we have not learned how to turn them into dinner and supper. And they all laughed thereat; but Birdalone said: See ye then how I was right to offer myself unto you as a servant, for in all matters of the house and the byre and the field have I skill. But since ye would not or could not have me, I wonder not that ye be ill at ease here, and long to be gone, for as plenteous and lovely as the isle is, and though ye live here without present mishandling or pining. For, sooth to say, ye have over you a tyrant and a fool.

Viridis answered: Yet is there something else, dear friend, that whets our longing to depart. Tell her thereof, Atra.

Atra smiled and said: Simple it is: there are they who long for us and for whom we long, and we would be together. Said Birdalone: Be these kinsfolk of yours, as fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, or the like?

Reddened Viridis again; but Atra spake, and she also blushed somewhat, though she smiled:

Those whom we love, and who love us, be not queans, but carles; neither be they of our blood, but aliens, till love overcometh them and causeth them to long to be of one flesh with us; and their longing is beyond measure, and they desire our bodies, which they deem far fairer than belike they be. And they would bed us, and beget children on us. And all this we let them do with a good will, because we love them for their might, and their truth, and the hotness of their love toward us.

Looked up Viridis thereat, and her eyes gleamed amidst the flushing of her cheeks, and she said: Sister, sister! even in such wise, and no other, as they desire us do we desire them; it is no mere good will toward them from us, but longing and hot love.

Now must Atra blush no less than Viridis; yet she but said: I have told thee hereof, Birdalone, because I deem that thou hast lived simply and without the sight of men; but it is what all know in the world of the sons of Adam. Said Birdalone: Thou sayest sooth concerning me. Yet about this love have I learned somewhat even ere to-day, and now, as ye speak and I, meseems the lore of it comes pouring in on me and fills my heart with its sweetness. And O, to have such love from any, and with such love to be loved withal!

Dear sister, said little Viridis, fear not; such as thou shall not fail of the love of some man whom thou must needs love. Is it not so, sister Atra?

Said Atra: Yea; such love shall come unto her as surely as death.

They were silent now a little, and it was as if some sweet incense had been burned within the chamber. For Birdalone the colour came and went in her cheeks, her flesh quaked, her heart beat quick, and she was oppressed by the sweetness of longing. More daintily she moved her limbs, and laid foot to foot and felt the sleekness of her sides; and tender she was of her body as of that which should one day be so sorely loved.

Now she spake timidly to the others, and said: Each one of you then has a man who loves her, and longs for her and for none else? So it is, said Viridis. How sweet that shall be! said Birdalone; and now all the more I wonder that ye could trouble yourselves over me, or think of me once; and the kinder I think it of you.

Said Atra smiling on her: Nay, now must the cat be out of the bag, and I must tell thee that thou art to think of us as chapmen who with our kindness would buy something of thee, to wit, that thou wouldst do an errand for us to those three lovers of ours. Surely, said Birdalone, it were a little payment to set against your saving of my life and my soul; and had I to go barefoot over red gleeds I would do it. And yet, if I may go hence to your lovers, why not all three of you along with me?

Said Atra: For this reason; thy ferry, the Sending Boat, wherein ye came hither, is even somewhat akin to thy mistress and ours; and the mistress

here hath banned it against bearing us; and now, were we so much as to touch it, such sore turmoil would arise, and such hideous noise as if earth and heaven were falling together; and the lady would be on us straightway, and we should be undone; and, as thou shalt hear presently, this hath been proved. But thou, thou art free of the said ferry. Forsooth I wot not why thy mistress banned it not against thee; maybe because she deemed not that thou wouldst dare to use it or even go anigh it.

Birdalone considered, and thought that even so it was; that the witch deemed that she would not dare use the Sending Boat, nor know how to, even if she came upon it, and that if she did so find it, she would sicken her of the road thereto. So now she told her friends the whole tale thereof more closely than she had afore, save again what pertained to Habundia; withal she told every word of what her mistress had said to her at that time when she changed her into a hind. And Viridis heard and wondered, and pitied her. But Atra sat somewhat downcast a while. Then she said: However this may be, we will send thee forth to-morrow in the dawn, and take the risk of what may befall thereafter; and thou shalt bear a token for each of those three that love us. For we deem that they have not forgotten aught, but are still seeking us.

Birdalone said: Whatsoever ye bid me, that will I do, and deem me your debtor still. But now I pray you, pleasure a poor captive somewhat more.

Wherein? said they both; we be all ready thereto. Said the maiden: Would ye do so much as to tell me the tale of how ye came hither, and then how it hath been with you from your first coming until now? With a good will, said Atra; hearken!

CHAPTER VI. ATRA TELLS OF HOW THEY THREE CAME UNTO THE ISLE OF INCREASE UNSOUGHT.

WE were born and bred in the land that lies southwest along this Great Water, and we waxed happily, and became fellows when we were yet but children, and thus grew up dear friends into maidenhood and womanhood. We were wooed by many men, but our hearts turned to none of them save unto three, who were goodly, kind, and valiant; and thou mayst call them the Golden Knight, who is Aurea's man; the Green Knight, who is man of Viridis; and my man, the Black Squire. But in this was unhap, that because of certain feuds which had endured from old time, this love was perilous unto them and us; so that we lived in doubt and unrest.

Came a day, now three years ago, when the king of the whole land brought his folk into our lake-side country, and there held a court and a mote in a fair great meadow anigh to the water. But even as the mote was hallowed, and the Peace of God proclaimed at the blast of the war-horn, came we three woeful ladies clad in black and knelt before the lord king, and prayed him hearken us. And he deemed that we were fair, so he had compassion on us, and raised us up, and bade us speak.

So we told our tale, how that strife and wounds and death stood betwixt us and love; and we wept, and bewailed it, that our love must be slain because men were wroth with each other and not with us.

The king looked on us kindly, and said: Who be the swains for whom these lovely damsels make such a piece of work? So we named them, and said that they were there in the mote; and the king knew them for valiant men who had done him good service; and he cried out their names, and bade them stand forth out of the throng. So forth they stood, the Golden Knight, the Green Knight, and the Black Squire (and he also was now a knight); but now were they all three clad in black, and they were unarmed, save for their swords girt to their sides, without which no man amongst us may come to the mote, be he baron or earl or duke, or the very lord king himself.

So the king looked upon us and them, and laughed and said: Fair ladies, ye have got me by the nose, so needs must my body follow. Do ye three knights, whom I know for valiant men and true, take each his love by the hand, and let the weddings be to-morrow. Who then were joyful but us? But even at the word the king spake arose great turmoil in the mote, for they smote the feud and contention awake, and men thronged forward against each other, and swords were drawn and brandished. But the king arose in his place and spake long and deftly, and waxed exceeding wroth, while none heeded him nor hearkened. And there stood our three men, who laid no hand to hilt, but abode heart-whole by seeming amid the tumult. And lovely they were to look on. At last the wise men and old barons went between, and by fair words appeased the trouble, and the mote grew hushed.

Then spake the king: What is this, my thanes? I had deemed that my foemen were far away, and that ye that here are were all friends unto me and unto each other. But now must we try another rede. Therewith he turned unto our men and said: Ye champions, are ye so much in love with Love that ye will fight for him? They all yeasaid that, and then the king said: Then do I declare that these three will hold the field against all comers from matins till high noon, and that he who vanquisheth any one of them shall have his lady and wed her if he will, and, if he will, shall ransom her. And this field shall be foughten after two months' frist in these fair meadows, when I return from the outermost marches of the south, whereto I am now wending. But when the battle is done, then let all men bow to the judgment of God, whether he be well content or not, and this on peril of life and limb. And now let there be deep peace between all men meanwhile; and if any break the peace, be he high or low, rich or unrich, churl or earl, I swear it by the souls of my fathers that he shall lose nought save his life therefor.

At these words was there a rumour of yeasay, and all men were content, save we three poor maidens, into whose hearts had now entered fear of loss and death.

But our kindreds on both sides were glad and proud, and they were not so bitter against us as they had been; they put hand to pouch, and let rear for us a fair pavilion of painted timber, all hung with silk and pictured cloths and Saracen

tapestry, by the very lake-side; and gay boats gaily bedight lay off the said pavilion for our pleasure; and when all was done, it yet lacked a half month of the day of battle, and thither were we brought in triumph by the kindreds on a fair day of May, and there was not a sword or a spear amongst the whole company, and peaceful and merry was all by seeming. But we were not suffered to meet our lovers all this while, from the time when the mote was.

Now on a day came a messenger on the spur, and did us to wit that the king would be with us on the morrow, and that the day after, the fateful field should be foughten. Then, though the coming of this day had been so longed for by us, yet now it was at hand it cast us into all unrest and trouble, so that we scarce knew whether to go, or stand, or sit, or what to do with our bodies. Our folk, and all other men withal, were so busy making ready for the morrow of to-morrow, that they left us alone to wear through the day as we might.

Now it was afternoon, and the day hot and hazy, and we stood on the very lip of the land wearied with hope and fear, and striving to keep good countenance to each other; and there came a boat unto the shore gaily painted and gilded, and bedight with silken cloths and cushions; and the steerer thereof was a woman, not young, by seeming of fifty winters; red-haired she was, thin-lipped and narrow-eyed, flat-breasted and strait-hipped; an ungoodly woman, though her skin was white and

smooth as for her age. Hast thou ever seen such an one, guest? Said Birdalone, smiling: Forsooth that have I; for such an one is my mistress to behold.

Well, said Atra, this dame stretched out her hands to us, and said: Will not the pretty ladies, the dear ladies, who have nought on hand this afternoon, come into my boat and look on the face of the water, so calm and fair as it is, and let their lovely hands go over the gunwale and play with the ripple, and so beguile this heavy time for a two hours; and then give a little gift of a piece or two of silver to a poor carline, who loveth all fair ladies and bright warriors, and who needeth a little livelihood?

Now the woman seemed nought lovely unto us, and to me forsooth she seemed hateful; but we looked on each other, and we found that we were utterly weary of going up and down on the meadow, and lying about in the pavilion, and it seemed as if this would give us a little rest; withal we saw not that the woman could do us any hurt, whereas we were three, and strong enough as women go; nor were we mariners so evil but that we might sail or steer a boat at a pinch. So we stepped into the boat straightway, and the woman sat aft and paddled deftly with the steering oar, and we glided away from the land.

Soon we were come so far that we could but just see our pavilion through the haze, which had somewhat thickened, and we said to the woman that she should go about and make for the shore, and

that then we would go to and fro a while along by our stead. She nodded yeasay, and began by seeming to dight the craft for return. But therewith the haze was grown suddenly into a low cloud, which came down upon us from the south-west in the arms of a cold breeze, that grew stronger every minute, so no wonder it was though the steerer might not keep head to wind; and then who was afraid and ashamed save ourselves?

But the woman said, and there seemed to be a mock in her voice: Ill luck, pretty ladies! Now is there nought for it but to drive, if we would not drown. But belike this duskiness will clear presently, and then at least we shall know whither we be going; and we may either turn back, or seek some other shelter, for I know the lake well; I know, I know.

We were too terror-stricken to speak, for we felt that still the wind grew stronger, and the lake began to rise into waves, and the craft to wallow; but well-nigh therewith was the dusk and the mist gone; the sky was bright blue overhead, and the westering sun shone cloudless; but on no land it shone, or on aught save the blue waters and the white wave-crests.

Then wept Aurea, and this Viridis here, but as to me, I grew wroth and cried out to the steerer: Accursed carline! thou hast betrayed us; never now may we get back to our pavilion till the fight is foughten, and our lovers will deem that we have forsaken them, and we are shamed for ever. Well, well, said the carline, what remedy save patience

for the winds and waves? And she laughed mockingly. Quoth I: There is this remedy, that we three arise and lay hands on thee, and cast thee outboard, save thou straightway turn the boat's head and back to the main. Forsooth I doubt not but that as thou hast raised this foul wind against us, thou canst raise a fair wind for us.

Hearken to the lovely lady! quoth the carline, how she deemeth me to be none other than the great God himself, to hold the winds in the hollow of my hand, and still the waves with a word! What! am I wrought somewhat after his image, kind ladies? And she grinned horribly therewith. Then she said again: As to thy remedy, sweetling, me-seemeth it nought. For how shall ye sail this stormy water when your captain is gone, and ye but holiday sailors belike?

As she spake, a great wave came up from the windward, and brake over us, and half filled the craft, and lifted her bows up towering, and then down we went into the trough; and I sat cowed and quaking, and spake never another word.

Now began the sun to sink, and the wind abated, and the sea went down, but the boat sped on as swift as ever over the landless waters.

Now the sun was down, and dusk was at hand, and the carline spake, and drew a bright-gleaming sax from under her raiment: Damsels, I warn you that now it were best that ye obey me in all things; for though ye be three and I one, yet whereas I have here an edge-friend, I may take the life of

any one of you, or of all three, as simply as I could cut a lamb's throat. Moreover it will serve you better in the house whereto ye are wending, that I make a good tale of you rather than a bad. For the mistress of that house is of all might; and I must say it of her, though she is my very sister, yet she is not so sweet-tempered and kind of heart as I am, but somewhat rough and unyielding of mood, so that it is best to please her. Wherefore, maidens, I rede you be sage.

Our unhappy hearts were now so sunken in wan-hope, that we had no word wherewith to answer her, and she spake: Now obey ye my bidding and eat and drink, that ye may come hale and sound to your journey's end, for I would not give starvelings to my dear sister. Therewith she brought forth victual for us, and that nought evil, of flesh and bread, and cheese and cakes, and good wine withal; and we were hunger-weary as well as sorrow-weary; and hunger did at that moment overcome sorrow, so we ate and drank, and, would we, would we not, something of heart came back to us thereby. Then again spake the carline: Now my will is that ye sleep; and ye have cushions and cloths enough to dight you a fair bed; and this bidding is easy for you to obey. Forsooth, so weary were we with sorrow, and our hunger was now quenched, that we laid us down and slept at once, and forgat our troubles.

When we awoke it was after the first dawn, and we were come aland even where thou didst this morning, guest. And thou mayst deem it

wondrous, but so it was, that close to where our boat took land lay the ferry which brought thee hither.

Now the carline bade us get ashore, and we did so, and found the land wondrous fair, little as that solaced us then. But she said unto us: Hearken! now are ye come home; and long shall ye dwell here, for never shall ye depart hence save by the will of my sister and me, wherefore, once more, I rede you be good, for it will be better for you. Go forth now unto yonder house, and on the way ye shall meet the Queen of this land, and ye have nought to do but to say to her that ye are the Gift; and then shall she see to your matter.

Therewith she gat into her own craft, the Sending Boat, and therein did the deed and spake the words ye wot of, and was gone north-away; and when we turned to seek for our boat wherein we had come hither, it was gone.

We stood miserably for a while on the lip of the land, and then I said that we might as well go meet our fate as die there of grief and hunger. So we went, and came into those fair gardens, and as we went slowly up toward the house came on us a woman clad in red scarlet and grandly dight. A big woman she was, and like to her that beguiled us, but far younger and fairer of favour, foolish and proud of visage. She stared on us, and seemed half afeard of us at first, but asked us what we were, and I answered that we were the Gift. The Gift? said she, what meaneth that? Will ye obey me in all things? If ye gainsay it, ye will perish,

unless ye can eat grass; for on this isle everything cometh from my hand.

What might we do? We all knelt down before her, and swore to do her will. Then she said, after she had stared on us a while: Now I know: ye are they of whom my sister spake, that she would fetch me a gift of a leash of damsels for my service. Now I take the Gift and thank her good heart. But if ye would do my will, then . . . But she broke off here and stared at us a long while, and then she said: Now I know; she bade me treat you well, and hold my hand from you, or evil would come of it, belike at last my bane. So go ye home to the house, and I will give you meat and drink, and show you my stores and the Wonder-coffer, and ye shall serve me in honour.

Even so did we; and we ate and drank and rested, and nought we lacked, save leave to depart home to our lovers, and some mistress better than this stupid and proud lump of flesh. But the next morning when we came before the lady, she knew nought of what we were; and again we had to tell her that we were the Gift, and again she glared at us balefully, and again she called to mind her sister and her rede concerning us. And this went on for many days, till at last she got to know what we were; and she followed her sister's rede in that she never mishandled us, though we could see that it irked her to forbear, nor did she speak to us more roughly than her fool's wont was; and we had in our hands all that was needed for our sustenance, and lived easily enough.

Now our coming hither betid three years ago, and a month thereafter comes thy witch hither in her ferry, and she greeted us when we met, and asked us, grinning, had she not been kind to win us such good days? Yea, and over kind, said she, ye would deem me, knew ye what would have betid you save for my good word. Forsooth we deemed it no kind deed to steal us from our lovers; but we kept good tongues in our heads, for thralls must needs kiss the rod.

She went away in two days, but came again many times thereafter, till we won the secret of the Sending Boat, and her spell therewith; but we knew not that was banned against us. Wherefore on a day in the grey of the morning, when we had been on this isle somewhat less than a year, we went down to it and stepped in, and reddened stem and stern and said the spell-words. But straightway arose an hideous braying and clatter, and thunder came therewith, and trembling of the earth, and the waters of the lake arose in huge waves; nor might we move from our seats in the boat till the two witches came running down to us, and haled us out ashore, and had us up into the house, and into this very prison-chamber, wherein we are now sitting so merry. And here we bore what was laid upon us, whereof, dear guest, we shall tell thee nought. But this came of it, that never thereafter durst we try the adventure of the Sending Boat, but have lived on in lazy sorrow and shameful ease, till thou, dear guest and sister, wert sent hither by heaven for our helping.

Now what became of the king's court, and the hazelled field of our champions, we wot not, or whether they be yet alive we cannot tell thee; but if they be alive, it is to them that we would have thee do our errand, and thereof will we tell thee closely to-morrow. And so, sweetling, an end of my tale.

CHAPTER VII. THE THREE DAMSELS TAKE BIRDALONE OUT OF THE WITCH'S PRISON.

BIRDALONE thanked Atra much for her tale, and strange it was to her to hear of such new things and the deeds of folk; but the dealing of the witches with those three was familiar to her and was of her world.

Now they talked merrily, till there came a footstep to the door and one without knocked. Viridis paled thereat, and a pang of fear smote Birdalone, and she swiftly got from out the chair and sat down on a stool; but when Atra opened, it was but Aurea come from her service to bid Atra take her place. So she went, and again was there pleasant converse betwixt Aurea and the other twain; and certain matters did Aurea tell Birdalone which had been left untold by Atra. And chiefly, when Birdalone asked if any other folk had come into the isle while they dwelt there, she said yea; once had come a knight with a lady, his love, fleeing from war and mishap, and these had the witch overcome by wizardry, and destroyed them miserably: and that again another had strayed thither, and him also the witch undid, because he would not do her will and lie in her bed. Withal had come drifting there a young damsel, a castaway of the winds and waves; her the witch kept as a thrall, and after a while took to mishandling her so sorely, that at last, what for shame and what for weariness of life, she cast herself into the water and was drowned. None of these

folk might the damsels help so as to do them any good, though they tried it, and went nigh to suffer therefor themselves.

Now the day wore, and in a while Atra came back, and Viridis must serve. At last the dusk and the dark was come. Then said Atra: Now must we twain begone to wait upon our lady, as the wont is: and that is now for our good hap, for if we be with her all three, and especially, to say sooth, if I be with her, we may well keep her from visiting thee here; since belike she shall yet dimly remember that thou art in her prison. Therefore thou must forgive it if I shackle thy wrists again. And now if thou wilt follow my rede, thou shalt try to sleep some deal, and it were well if thou might'st sleep till we come for thee in the grey dawn.

Therewith they left her there, and she nestled in the corner once more, and there did verily fall asleep, and slept till the key in the lock and the opening door awakened her, and Atra came stealing soft-footed into the prison. Eager she was and panting, and she kneeled before Birdalone and unlocked her leg-shackles, and then stood up and did the like by the irons on her wrists. Then she said: Look up, dear friend, to thy prison windows, and behold the dawn beginning to break on the day of thy deliverance, and ours maybe. But come now at once: and again, wilt thou pardon me, that we clothe thee not here for thy journey? For from our own bodies must we clothe thee, and if by any hap our lady were to see any one of us more or less unclad, it might draw her on to see what was

toward, and we might yet be found out, for our undoing.

Therewith she took her hand, and led her forth of the prison, and locked the door behind her; and then downstairs they went, and out-a-doors by a little wicket at the stair-end. The dawn drew on apace now, and Birdalone saw at once the other twain lurking in the wall-nook hard by. No word was spoken between them, and with noiseless feet they went forth into the orchard, where the blackbirds and thrushes were beginning their first morning song, and ere they came out on to the meadow the full choir of them was a-singing.

CHAPTER VIII. IN WHAT WISE BIRDALONE WAS CLAD, AND HOW SHE WENT HER WAYS FROM THE ISLE OF INCREASE UNSOUGHT.

WHEN they were all clear of the orchard trees the three damsels kept Birdalone between them closely, so that her white body should not be seen if the lady were awake and looking forth. Thus they brought her to where a few thorn-bushes made a cover for them close to the water's edge, some twenty yards from the Sending Boat. There they stood together, and Atra said: Now, dear guest, and dearest messenger, it is our matter to clothe thee from our very bodies; and do thou, Viridis, begin.

Viridis came forward blushing, as her wont was, and took off her green gown and laid it on the grass; then she set her hand to her smock, and did it off, and stood naked, knee set to knee, and swaying like the willow branch; and then was seen all the dainty fashion of her body, and how lovely of hue and sweet of flesh she was.

But she said: Dear sister Birdalone, here is my smock, which I lend thee, but as to my love, I give it thee therewith; therefore grudge it not, though thou give me back the linen, for happy will be the day to me when I have it again; for now none may do it on me save the Green Knight, my own love. Therewith she gave her the smock, and kissed her, and Birdalone did it on, and felt the valianter and mightier when she had a garment upon her.

Then Aurea did off her golden gown, and stood in smock alone, so that her naked arms shone more precious than the golden sleeves that had covered them. And she spake: Birdalone, dear messenger, take now my golden gown, and send it back to me when thou hast found the man unto whom it is due; and think meanwhile that, when thou wearest it, thou wearest my love, and that when thou pullest it off, thou art clad with my love instead of it.

So Birdalone did on the gown, and became to look on as the daintiest of the queens of the earth; and she turned her head about to look on her gold-clad flanks, and wondered.

Thereafter Atra knit up her skirts into her girdle, and then did off her shoon, so that her slim feet shone like pearls on the green grass; and she said: Birdalone, sweet friend! wilt thou be my messenger to bear these shoon to my Black Squire, and meanwhile put my love for thee under thy feet, to speed thee and to bear thee up? Wherefore be good to me.

Birdalone then shod herself, and though pity it were to hide her feet from the eyes of Earth, yet felt she the stouter-hearted thereby, and her cheeks flushed and her eyes brightened.

Thereafter Aurea gave her withal a golden collar for the neck, and Viridis a girdle of silver well-wrought, and Atra a gold finger-ring set with a sapphire stone; and all these she did on her; but yet she knew that they were tokens to be delivered to the three lovers according as was due.

Then spake Atra: Lo, sister, we pray thee to bear these lendings on thy body in such wise that when thou comest to the mainland they may be seen by knights seeking adventures, and that thou mayst answer to any who may challenge thee thereof, and say that thou bearest this raiment and these jewels from Aurea and Viridis and Atra to Baudoin the Golden Knight, and to Hugh the Green Knight, and to Arthur the Black Squire. And if thou deem that thou hast found these, then shall they tell thee a token, such as we shall tell thee, that they be truly these and none other; and thereafter, when thou art made sure, they shall take of thee the raiment, the gems, and the Sending Boat, and come hither if they may. And God look to the rest! But as for the token to be told aforesaid, we have determined that each of us shall tell thee privily what question thou shalt ask for her, and what answer thou must look for.

When she had done speaking, each came up to Birdalone and spake something into her ear amidst blushes enough forsooth. And what they said will be seen hereafter. Then again said Atra: Now by this errand shall we be well paid for the care we have had of thee. It may be, forsooth, that thou shalt not find our speech-friends; for they may be dead, or they may deem us untrue, and may have forsaken us and their land; and in any such case thou art free of our errand; but whatsoever may betide us, God speed thee!

Then Viridis drew forth a basket from under a bush, and said: We know not how long thy voy-

age may be, but some little provision for the way we may at least give thee: now wilt thou bear this aboard thyself, for we dare not touch thy craft, nay, nor come nigh it, no one of us. And she set down the basket and cast her arms about her, and kissed her and wept over her; and the other twain, they also kissed her lovingly. Birdalone wept even as Viridis, and said: May ye do well, who have been so kind to me; but now am I both so glad and so sorry, that the voice of me will not make due words for me. O farewell!

Therewith she took up her basket, and turned and went speedily to the Sending Boat; and they beheld her how she stepped aboard and bared her arm, and drew blood from it with the pin of her girdle-buckle, and therewith reddened stem and stern; and a pang of fear smote into their hearts lest their lady had banned it for Birdalone as for them. But Birdalone sat down on the thwart, and turned her face south, and spake:

The red raven-wine now
Hast thou drunk, stern and bow;
Awake then, awake!
And the southward way take:
The way of the Wender forth over the flood,
For the will of the Sender is blent with the blood.

No cloud barred the gateway of the sun as she spoke; no wave rose upon the bosom of the lake; no clatter nor tumult was there; but the Sending Boat stirred, and then shot out swiftly into the wide water; and the sun arose as they looked, and his path of light flashed on Birdalone's golden

gown for a moment, and then it grew grey again, and presently she was gone from before their eyes.

So they turned up into the orchard: and now was Viridis of good cheer, and Aurea no less; but Atra lagged behind, and as she went, some passion took her, she knew not wherefore; her bosom swelled, her shoulders heaved therewith, and she wept.

CHAPTER IX. HOW BIRDALONE CAME TO THE ISLE OF THE YOUNG AND THE OLD.

ALL went well with Birdalone when she had left the Isle of Increase Unsought, much as it had on her first voyage, save that now she was both clad and victualled, and her heart, if yet it harboured fear, was also full of new and strange hope; and oft, even as she sat there amidst the waste of waters, she wondered what new longing this was which wrought so sweet a pain in her, that it made her cheeks burn, and her eyes dim, and her hands and her limbs restless. And then would she set her mind to her friends and their errand, and would hope and pray for them; but again would she fall to picture to herself what manner of men they were who were so sore longed for by those three beauteous women; and she deemed that since they were thus desired, they must be fairer even than her friends of the isle; and again the nameless longing overtook her, and held her till it wearied her into sleep.

When she awoke again the boat had stayed, and she was come aland; but the dawn was not yet come, and the night was moonless, yet was there light enough to see, from the water and the stars, that the bows of the boat were lying safe on a little sandy beach. So she stepped out and looked around, and deemed she could see great trees before her, and imagined also dark masses of she knew not what. So she walked warily up the

said strand till she came on to soft grass, and smelled the scent of the clover as her foot-soles crushed it. There she sat down, and presently lay along and went to sleep.

After a while she awoke, and felt happy and well at ease, and had no will to move: the sun was shining brightly, but had not been up long: the song of birds was all about her, but amidst it she deemed she heard some speech of man, though it were not like to what she had heard in her life before. So she raised herself on her elbow, and looked up and saw a new thing, and sat up now, and beheld and wondered.

For there stood before her, gazing wide-eyed on her, two little children, some three winters of age, a man and a woman as it seemed. The man-child with light and fine white-golden hair, falling straight down and square over his brow, and blue-grey eyes which were both kind and merry, and shyly seeking as it were. Plump and rosy he was, sturdy and stout-limbed. No less fair was the woman; her hair golden-brown, as oft it is with children who grow up dark-haired, and curling in fair little rings all over her head; her eyes were big and dark grey; she was thinner than the lad, and somewhat taller.

These two babes had between them a milk-white she-goat, and had been playing with her, and now she turned her head to this and that one of them, bleating, as if to crave more of the game; but they had no eyes for her, but stood staring with might and main on the new-comer and her shining golden gown.

Birdalone laughed with joy when she saw the little ones, and a dim memory of the days of Utterhay passed before her: she stretched out a hand to them, and spake softly and caressingly, and the little lad came forward smiling, and took her hand, and made as if he would help her up for courtesy's sake. She laughed on him, and arose; and when she stood up, tall and golden, he seemed somewhat afeard of so big a creature, but stood his ground valiantly. Then she stooped down to him and kissed him, and he naysaid her not, but seemed rather glad when it was over; but when Birdalone went to the little maid, and kissed her, the child clung to her as if she were her mother, and babbled to her.

Then comes the lad to her, and takes her hand, and would draw her away, and speaks to her in his prattle, and she understood him to mean that she should come with him to see the father. So she went, wondering what should next betide; and the little maiden went on the other side of her, holding by a fold of her skirt. Forsooth the goat followed bleating, not well pleased to be forgotten.

Now had Birdalone time to look about her, though the two babes fell to prattling with her in their way, and she thought it sweet to look down on the two little faces that looked up to her so pleased and merry.

She was in a grassy plain, somewhat over rough and broken to be called a meadow, and not enough be-timbered to be called a wood; it rose up a little and slowly as they left the water, but scarce so much

as one might call it a hill. Straight before her on the way that they were going went up into the air great masses of grey stone builded by man's hand, but looking, even from this way off, ragged and ruinous. It may well be thought that Birdalone wondered what things might lie betwixt the trees and the towers.

Now as they went they came on other goats, who seemed tame, and these joined them to their fellow, and suffered the younglings to play with them. Moreover there were rabbits great plenty scuttling in and out of the brakes and the rough ground upon the way, and the younglings beheld them, and the little lad said, after his fashion: Why do the rabbits run away from us, and the goats follow us? Now, sooth to say, Birdalone scarce knew why, and had no word ready for the child; but she said at last: Mayhappen they will come to me; so it was once when I dwelt away from here. Shall I go fetch thee one? The little ones yeasaid that, though somewhat shyly and doubtfully. Then said Birdalone: Do ye, sweetlings, abide me here, and go not away. They nodded their heads thereat, and Birdalone kilted her skirts and went her ways to some broken bushed ground, where was a many rabbits playing about; but she went not out of eyeshot of the babes. Before she was well-nigh to the little beasts, she fell to talking to them in a low sweet voice, as had been her wont when she was little; and when they heard it, those who had not scuttled away at first glance of her, fell to creeping little short creeps one to the other, as their

manner is when they be alone together and merry; and they suffered her to come quite amongst them, and crept about her feet while she stood, still talking unto them. Then she stooped down and took up one in her arms and caressed it, and then laid him down and took up another, and so with three or four of them; and she fell to pushing them, and rolling them over with her foot; then she turned a little away from them toward the children, and then a little more, and the rabbits fell to following her, and she turned and took up one in her arms, and went straight on toward the children, but turning and talking to the rabbits now and again.

As to the babes, she saw the goats, of whom were now a dozen, or thereabouts, standing together in a kind of ring, and the little ones going from one to the other playing with them happily. But presently the lad turned and saw her coming with her tail of little beasts, and he cried out a great Oh! and ran toward her straightway, and the maiden after him; and he held out his arms to have the rabbit she bore, and she gave it to him smiling, and said: Lo now! here be pretty playmates; but look to it that ye be soft and kind with them, for they are but feeble people. So the younglings fell to sporting with their new friends, and for a little forgat both goats and golden lady; but the goats drew nigh, and stood about them bleating, nor durst they run at the rabbits to butt them, because of Bird-alone and the little ones.

There then stood the slim maiden, tall and gleaming above her little flock; and her heart was full of

mirth and rest, and the fear was all forgotten. But as she looked up toward the grey walls, lo, new tidings to hand! For she saw an old man with a long white beard slowly coming toward them: she started not, but abode his coming quietly, and as he drew nigh she could see of him that he was big and stark, and, old as he was, not yet bowed with his many years. He stood looking on this Queen and her court silently a while, and then he spake: Such a sight I looked not to see on this Isle of the Young and the Old. She said: But meseemeth it is full meet that these younglings should sport with the creatures. He smiled and said: Such a voice I looked not to hear on the Isle of the Young and the Old.

Birdalone became somewhat troubled, and said: Am I welcome here? for if I be not, I will pray thy leave to depart. He said: Thou art as welcome as the very spring, my child; and if thou have a mind to abide here, who shall naysay thee? For surely thou art young; nay, in regard to me thou art scarce older than babes. All blessings be with thee. But though thou art true and kind, as is clear to be seen by thy playing with these children and the landward beasts in peace and love, yet it may be so that thou hast brought hither somewhat less than peace. And he smiled upon her strangely.

She looked somewhat scared at his last words, and said: But how so? If I might I would bear nought but peace and happiness to any place. The old carle laughed outright now, and said: How

so, dear child? because ladies so sweet and lovesome as thou be sent by love, and love rendeth apart that which was joined together.

She wondered at his word, and was bewildered by it, but she held her peace; and he said: Now we may talk hereof later on; but the matter to hand now is the quenching of thine hunger; for I will not ask thee whereby thou camest, since by water thou needs must have come. Wherefore now I bid thee to our house, and these little ones shall go with us, and the three of these horned folk whom we are wont to tether amidst the wrack and ruin of what once was fair; the rest have our leave to depart, and these nibblers also; for we have a potherb garden by our house, and are fain to keep the increase of the same for ourselves. Birdalone laughed, and shook her skirts at the coneys, and they all scuttled away after the manner of their kind. Thereat the little lad looked downcast and well-nigh tearful, but the maid stamped her foot, and roared well-favouredly.

Birdalone did her best to solace her, and plucked a bough from a hawthorn bush far above the little ones' reach whereon was yet some belated blossom, and gave it to her and stilled her. But the old man picked out his milch-goats from the flock (whereof was the white), and drave them before him, while the two babes went on still beside Birdalone, the little carle holding her hand and playing with the fingers thereof, the maiden sometimes hanging on to her gown, sometimes going loose and sporting about beside her.

So came they to where the ground became smoother, and there was a fair piece of greensward in a nook made by those great walls and towers, which sheltered it from the north. The said walls seemed to be the remnant of what had once been a great house and castle; and up aloft, where was now no stair to come at them, were chimneys and hearths here and there, and windows with fair seats in them, and arched doors and carven pillars, and many things beautiful, but now was all ruined and broken, and the house was roofless and floorless: withal it was overgrown with ash-trees and quicken-beam, and other berry-trees and key-trees, which had many years ago seeded in the rent walls, and now grew there great and flourishing. But in the innermost nook of this mighty remnant, and using for its lowly walls two sides of the ancient ashlar ones, stood a cot builded not over trimly of small wood, and now much overgrown with roses and woodbine. In front of it was a piece of garden ground, wherein waxed pot-herbs, and a little deal of wheat; and therein was a goodly row of bee-skeps; and all without it was the pleasant greensward aforesaid, wherein stood three great ancient oaks, and divers thorns, which also were ancient after their kind.

The elder led his guest into the cot, which had but simple plenishing of stools and benches, and a table unartful, and then went to tether his goats in the ruined hall of the house, and the children must needs with him, though Birdalone had been glad of one of them at least; but there was no

nay, but that they must go see their dear white goat in her stall. Howsoever all three came back again presently, the old carle with a courteous word in his mouth, and he took Birdalone's hand, and kissed it and bade her welcome to his house, as though he had been a great lord at home in his own castle. Therewith must the little ones also kiss her hand and be courteous; and Birdalone suffered it, laughing, and then caught them up in her arms, and clipped and kissed them well-favouredly; wherewith belike they were not over-well pleased, though the boy endured it kindly. Thereafter the elder set forth his banquet, which was simple enough: upland cheer of cream and honey, and rough bread; but sweet it was to Birdalone to eat it with good welcome, and the courtesy of the old man.

When they were done, they went out-a-doors, and Birdalone and the old man laid them down under an oak-tree, and the children sported about anigh them. Then spake Birdalone: Old man, thou hast been kind unto me; but now wouldest thou tell me about thee, what thou art, and what are these walls about us here? Said he: I doubt if I may do so, this day at least. But belike thou shalt abide with us, and then some day the word may come into my mouth. She held her peace, and into her mind it came that it would be sweet to dwell there, and watch those fair children waxing, and the lad growing up and loving her; yea, even she fell to telling up the years which would make him a man, and tried to see herself, how she

would look, when the years were worn thereto. Then she reddened at the untold thought, and looked down and was silent. But the elder looked on her anxiously, and said: It will be no such hard life for thee, for I have still some work in me, and thou mayst do something in spite of thy slender and delicate fashion. She laughed merrily, and said: Forsooth, good sire, I might do somewhat more than something; for I am deft in all such work as here ye need; so fear not but I should earn my livelihood, and that with joy. Merry days shall we have then, said he.

But therewith her eye caught the gleam of her golden sleeve, and she thought of Aurea, and her heart smote her for her errand; then she laid her hand on her girdle and called to mind little Viridis, and the glitter of the ring on her finger brought the image of Atra before her; then she rose up and said: Thou art kind, father, but I may not; I have an errand; this day must I depart from thee. He said: Thou hast broken my heart; if I were not so old, I would weep. And he hung adown his head.

She stood before him abashed, as if she had done him a wrong. At last he looked up and said: Must it be to-day? Wilt thou not abide with us night-long, and go thy ways in the early morning?

Now she scarce knew how to gainsay him, so wretched as the old carle looked; so it came to this, that she yeasaid the abiding till to-morrow. Then suddenly he became gay and merry, and he kissed her hand, and fell to much speaking, telling tales of

little import concerning his earlier days. But when she asked him again of how he came there, and what meant the great ruined house, then he became foolish and wandering, and might scarce answer her; whereas otherwise he was a well-spoken old carle of many words, and those of the grandest.

Then changed his mood again, and he fell to bewailing her departure, and how that henceforth he should have none to speak to him with understanding. Then she smiled on him and said: But yonder babes will grow up; month by month they will be better fellows unto thee. Fair child, he said, thou dost not know. My days to come are but few, so that I should see but little of their waxing in any case. But furthermore, wax they will not; such as they be now, such shall they be till I at least see the last of them and the earth.

Birdalone wondered at this word, and the place seemed changed to her, yea, was grown somewhat dreary; but she said to the carle: And thou, dost thou change in any wise, since these change not? He laughed somewhat grimly, and said: The old that be here change from old to dead; how could I change to better? Yea, the first thing I had to do here was to bury an old man. Quoth she: And were there any children here then? Yea, said he; these same, or I can see no difference in them. Said Birdalone: And how long ago is that? And how camest thou hither? His face became foolish, and he gibbered rather than spake: No, I wot not; no, no, no, not a whit, a whit. But presently after was he himself again, and telling her a

tale of a great lady of the earl-folk, a baron's dame, and how dear he was unto her. He lay yet on the grass, and she stood before him, and presently he put forth a hand to her gown-hem and drew her to him thereby, and fell to caressing her feet; and Birdalone was ashamed thereat, and a little angry. He was nought abashed, but sat up and said: Well, since thou must needs depart to-morrow, be we merry to-day. And I pray thee talk much with me, fair child, for sweet and sweet is thy voice to hearken. Then he arose and said: Now will I fetch thee somewhat to eke the joy of us both. And he turned therewith and went into the house.

Birdalone stood there, and was now perplexed and down-hearted; for now the look of the elder scarce liked her, and the children began to seem to her as images, or at the best not more to her than the rabbits or the goats; and she rued her word that she would abide there the night through. For she said to herself: I fear some trap or guile; is the witch behind this also? for the old man is yet stark, and though he be foolish at whiles, yet may wizardry have learned him some guile.

With that cometh out the carle again, bearing a little keg and a mazer roughly wrought; and he came to Birdalone, and sat down, and bade her sit by him, and said to her: Maybe I shall hear more of thy sweet voice when thy sweet lips have been in the cup. Therewith he poured forth into the mazer, and handed it to Birdalone, and lo! it was clear and good mead. She sipped thereof daintily, and, to say sooth, was well-pleased therewith, and it

stirred the heart in her. But then she gave back the cup to the elder, and would no more of it. As for him, he drank what was left in the cup, looking over the rim thereof meanwhile; and then filled himself another, and another, and yet more. But whereas it might have been looked for that his tongue should be loosened by the good mead into foolishness and gibbering, he became rather few-spoken, and more courteous and stately even than he had been at the first. But in the end, forsooth, he was forgetting Birdalone, what she was, and he fell a-talking, always with much pomp and state, as if to barons and earls, and great ladies; till suddenly his head fell back, he turned over on his face, and all wit was gone from him.

At first, then, Birdalone was afraid that he was dead, or nigh unto death, and she knelt down and raised his head, and fetched water and cast it over his face. But when she saw that he was breathing not so ill, and that the colour was little changed in his lips and cheeks, she knew that it was but the might of the mead that had overcome him. Wherefore she laid him so that he was easy, and then stood up and looked about her, and saw the children playing together a little way off, and nought else anigh her, save the birds in the brake, or flying on their errands eagerly from place to place. Then, as it were, without her will being told them, her limbs and her feet turned her about to the shore where lay the Sending Boat, and she went speedily but quietly thitherward, her heart beating quick, for fear lest something should yet stay her, and her eyes

glancing from brake to bush, as if she looked to see some enemy, old or new, come out thence.

So now her will was clear enough to her feet, and they brought her down to the water-side and the long strand, past which the wide water lay windless and gleaming in the hot afternoon. Then lightly she stepped aboard, and awoke the Sending Boat with blood-offering, and it obeyed her, and sped swiftly on the way to the southward.

CHAPTER X. BIRDALONE COMES TO THE ISLE OF THE QUEENS.

BIRDALONE awoke the next morning while the boat was yet speeding over the water, and the sun was up: but she was hard on the land, which sat low and green, like a meadow exceeding fair, on the bosom of the water, and many goodly trees were sprinkled about the greenland. But from amidst the trees, no great way from the water's edge, rose a great house, white and fair, as if it were new-builded, and all glorious with pinnacles, and tabernacles set with imagery.

Presently the boat's bows ran into the reed and rush at the brim of the water, and Birdalone stepped ashore without more ado, and the scent of the meadow-sweet amongst which she landed brought back unto her the image of Green Eyot that while agone.

But now when she was ashore the dread took hold of her again, and her knees trembled under her, so that she might scarce stand, so fearful was she of walking into some trap; especially when she beheld that goodly house, lest therein awaited her some proud and cruel lady, and no kind damsels to deliver her.

She looked about her, and saw in all the fair meadow neither man nor woman, nor draught-beast nor milch-beast, nought but the little creatures of the brake and the bent-grass, which were but as the blossoms thereof, and the birds running in the herbage or singing amidst the tree-boughs.

Then she thought that she must needs go forward, or belike her errand would not speed; that the Sending Boat might not obey her, unless she saw through the adventure to the end; so she went on toward the house quaking.

Soon was she at the porch of the white palace, and had seen no man nor heard any voice of men; much she marvelled, despite her dread, at the beauty of the said house, and the newness thereof; for it was as one flower arisen out of the earth, and every part of it made the beauty of the other parts more excellent; and so new it was, that it would have seemed as if the masons thereof had but struck their scaffold yesterday, save that under the very feet of the walls the sweet garden flowers grew all uncrushed.

Now comes Birdalone through the porch unto the screens of the great hall; and she stopped a little to recover her breath, that she might be the quieter and calmer amongst the great folk and mighty whom she looked to find therein. So she gathered heart; but one thing daunted her, to wit, that she heard no sound come from that great and goodly hall, so that she doubted if it were perchance left desert by them who had been its lords.

She raised her hand to the door of the screen, and it opened easily before her, and she entered, and there indeed she saw new tidings. For the boards endlong and overthwart were set, and thereat were sitting a many folk, and their hands were reached out to knife and to dish, and to platter and cup; but such a hush there was within, that

the song of the garden birds without sounded to her as loud as they were the voices of the children of Adam.

Next she saw that all that company, from the great folk on the dais down to those who stood about the hall to do the service, were women, one and all; not one carle might she see from where she stood: lovely were they many of them, and none less than comely; their cheeks were bright, and their eyes gleamed, and their hair flowed down fair of fashion. And she stood, and durst not move a long while, but expected when someone would speak a word, and all should turn their heads toward the new-comer. But none moved nor spake. And the fear increased in her amidst that hush, and weighed so heavy on her heart, that at last she might endure it no longer, but fell swooning to the floor.

When she came to herself, and the swoon-dreams had left her, she saw by the changing of the sun through the hall-windows, that she had lain there long, more nearly two hours than one; and at first she covered her face with her hands as she crouched there, that she might not see the sight of the silent hall, for yet was it as hushed as before. Then slowly she arose, and the sound of her raiment and her stirring feet was loud in her ears. But when she was upright on her feet, she hardened her heart, and went forth into the hall, and no less was her wonder than erst. For when she came close to those ladies as they sat at table, and her raiment brushed the raiment of the serving-women as she passed by, then saw she how no breath came from any of these,

and that they neither spake nor moved, because they were dead.

At first, then, she thought to flee away at once, but again she had mind of her errand, and so went up the hall, and so forth on to the dais; and there again, close by the high table, she saw new tidings. For there was set a bier, covered with gold and pall, and on it was laid a tall man, a king, belted and crowned; and beside the said bier, by the head of the king, knelt a queen of exceeding goodly body, clad all in raiment of pearl and bawdekin; and her hands were clasped together, and her mouth was drawn, and her brow knit with the anguish of her grief. But athwart the king's breast lay a naked sword all bloody; and this Birdalone noted, that whereas the lady was of skin and hue as if she were alive, the king was yellow as wax, and his cheeks were shrunken, and his eyes had been closed by the wakers of the dead.

Long Birdalone looked and wondered; and now if her fear were less, her sorrow was more for all that folk sitting there dead in their ancient state and pomp. And was not the thought clean out of her head, that yet they might awake and challenge her, and that she might be made one of that silent company. Withal she felt her head beginning to fail her, and she feared that she might swoon again and never waken more, but lie for ever beside that image of the dead king.

So then she refrained her both of fear and sorrow, and walked speedily down the hall, looking neither to the right nor left: and she came forth

into the pleasance, but stayed there nought, so nigh it seemed to that hushed company. Thence came she forth into the open meadow, and sweet and dear seemed its hot sunshine and noisy birds and rustling leaves. Nevertheless, so great was the tumult of her spirits, that once more she grew faint, and felt that she might scarce go further. So she dragged herself into the shade of a thorn-tree, and let her body sink unto the ground, and lay there long unwitting.

CHAPTER XI. AND NOW SHE COMES TO THE ISLE OF THE KINGS.

WHEN Birdalone came to herself it was drawing toward the glooming, and she rose up hastily, and went down to the Sending Boat, for she would not for aught abide the night in that fearful isle, lest the flock of the hall should come alive and walk in the dusk and the dark. She stepped aboard lightly, and yielded her blood to the pride of that ferry, and it awoke and bore her forth, and she went through the night till she fell asleep.

When she awoke it was broad day and the sun just arising, and lo! before her, some half mile off, an isle rugged and rocky, and going up steep from the shore; and then, held as it were by the fangs of the rocks and pikes of the higher land, was a castle, white, high, and hugely builded, though, because of the rock-land belike, it spread not much abroad. Like to the lovely house of yesterday, it seemed new-builded; and, little as Birdalone knew of such matters, her heart told her that this new house was fashioned for battle.

She was downcast when she saw the isle so rugged and forbidding, but when the boat came aland in a stony bight, whence the ground went up somewhat steeply toward the heights, she went ashore straightway, and toiled up toward the white battlement. Presently she found herself in a strait and rugged path betwixt two walls of rock, so that she lost sight of the castle a while, till she came

out on to a level place which looked down from aloft on to the blue water, but all over against her close at hand were the great towers and walls. She was worn by the rough road, and over helpless she felt her, and all too little to deal with that huge morsel of the world; and her valiancy gave way, and her trust in her errand. She sat down on a stone and wept abundantly.

After a while she was amended, and she looked up and saw the huge hold, and said: Yea, but if it were less by the half than it is, it would still be big enough to cow me. Yet she stood not up. Then she put forth a foot of her, and said aloud: Sorely hath this rough road tried Atra's shoon and their goodly window-work; if they are to be known I must be speedy on my journey or go barefoot.

As she spoke she stood up, and the sound of her own voice frighted her, though nought noiseless was the place; for the wind was there, and beat to and fro the castle and the rock, and ran baffled into every corner of that market-place of nothing. For in that garth was neither knight nor squire nor sergeant; no spear-head glittered from the wall, no gleam of helm showed from the war-swales; no porter was at the gate; the drawbridge over the deep ghyll was down, the portcullis was up, and the great door cast wide open.

Birdalone steeled her heart and went forward swiftly, and over the bridge, and entered the base-court, and came without more ado to the door of the great hall, and opened it easily, as with the

door of yesterday, looking to find another show like unto that one; and even so it fell out.

Forsooth the hall was nought light and lovely, and gay with gold and bright colours, as that other, but beset with huge round pillars that bore aloft a wide vault of stone, and of stone were the tables; and the hallings that hung on the wall were terrible pictures of battle and death, and the fall of cities, and towers a-tumbling and houses a-flaming.

None the less there also were the shapes of folk that moved not nor spake, though not so thronged was that hall as the other one; and it seemed as if men were sitting there at a council rather than a feast. Close by Birdalone's right hand as she entered were standing in a row along the screen big men-at-arms all weaponed, and their faces hidden by their sallets; and down below the dais on either side of the high table was again a throng of all-armed men; and at the high-table itself, and looking down the hall, sat three crowned kings, each with his drawn sword lying across his knees, and three long-hoary wise men stood before them at the nether side of the board.

Birdalone looked on it all, striving with her fear: but yet more there was, for she deemed that needs must she go through the hall up to the dais, lest the Sending Boat deny its obedience. Up toward the dais she went then, passing by weaponed men who sat as if abiding the council's end at the end-long tables. And now, though no shape of man there spake or breathed, yet sound lacked not; for within the hall went the wind as without, and beat

about from wall to wall, and drave clang and clash from the weapons hung up, and waved the arras, and fared moaning in the nooks, and hummed in the vault above.

Came she up to the dais then, and stood beside one of the wise men, and looked on the kings, and saw the mightiness which had been in them, and quaked before them. Then she turned from them and looked down to the floor, and lo! there, just below the dais, lay a woman on a golden bier; exceeding fair had she been, with long yellow hair streaming down from her head; but now waxen white she was, with ashen lips and sunken cheeks. Clad was she in raiment of purple and pall, but the bosom of her was bared on one side, and therein was the road whereby the steel had fared which had been her bane.

Now when Birdalone had gazed thereon a while, she deemed that if she tarried there long amidst those fierce men by the dead woman, she should lose her wit full soon, so sore the fear, held back, beset her now. Wherefore she turned and went hastily down the hall, and out-a-doors, and over the bridge, and ran fleet-foot down the rocky way whereby she had come, till she could run no further, and lay down under a great stone breathless and fordone; yet her heart upheld her and suffered her not to swoon, belike because she had given her limbs such hard work to do.

There she lay awake and troubled for an hour or more, and then she fell asleep, and slept till the day was worn toward sunset, and nought med-

dled with her. She arose and went to her ship somewhat downhearted, wondering how many such terrors should befall her; nay, whether the Sending Boat would so lead her that henceforth she should happen on no children of Adam but such as were dead images of the living. Had all the world died since she left the Isle of the Young and the Old?

Howsoever, she had nought to do save to board her ferry, and content its greedy soul with her blood, and drive it with the spell-words. And thereafter, when it was speeding on, and the twilight dusking apace, she looked aback, and seemed to see the far-off woodland in the northern ort, and the oak-clad ridge, where she had met her wood-mother; and then it was as if Habundia were saying to her: Meet again we shall. And therewith straightway became life sweeter unto her.

Deepened then the dusk, and became night, and she floated on through it, and was asleep alone on the bosom of the water.

CHAPTER XII. OF BIRDALONE, HOW SHE CAME UNTO THE ISLE OF NOTHING.

LONG before sunrise, in the very morn-dusk, she awoke and found that her ferry had taken land again. Little might she see what the said land was like; so she sat patiently and abode the day in the boat; but when day was come, little more was to see than erst. For flat was the isle, and scarce raised above the wash of the leeward ripple on a fair day; nor was it either timbered or bushed or grassed, and, so far as Birdalone might see, no one foot of it differed in aught from another. Natheless she deemed that she was bound to go ashore and seek out the adventure, or spoil her errand else.

Out of the boat she stepped then, and found the earth all paved of a middling gravel, and nought at all growing there, not even the smallest of herbs; and she stooped down and searched the gravel, and found neither worm nor beetle therein, nay nor any one of the sharp and slimy creatures which are wont in such ground.

A little further she went, and yet a little further, and no change there was in the land; and yet she went on and found nothing; and she wended her ways southward by the sun, and the day was windless.

At last she had gone a long way and had no sight of water south of the isle, nor had she seen any hill, nay, not so much as an ant-heap, whence

she might look further around; and it seemed to her that she might go on for ever, and reach the heart of Nowhither at last. Wherefore she thought she would turn back and depart this ugly isle, and that no other adventure abided her therein. And by now it was high noon; and she turned about and took a few steps on the backward road.

But even therewith it seemed as if the sun, which heretofore had been shining brightly in the heavens, went out as a burnt-down candle, and all was become dull grey over head, as all under foot was a dull dun. But Birdalone deemed she could follow a straight course back again, and so walked on sturdily. Hour after hour she went and stayed not, but saw before her no glimpse of the northern shore, and no change in the aspect of the ground about her.

It had so happened that a little before she had turned to go back, she had eaten her dinner of a piece of bread and a morsel of cheese, and now as she stooped and peered on the ground, looking for some sign of the way, as her foot-prints going south, and had her eyes low anigh the earth, she saw something white at her feet in the gathering dusk (for the day was wearing), and she put her hand to it and lifted it, and found it a crumb of bread, and knew that it must have come from her dinner of seven hours ago, whereas till that time her bread had lain unbroken in her scrip. Fear and anguish smote her therewith, for she saw that in that dull land, every piece whereof was like every other piece, she must have gone about in a ring, and come

back again to where she first turned to make for the northern shore.

Yet would she not cast aside all hope, but clad herself in her valiancy. Forsooth she knew it availed nought to try to move on in the twilight; so she laid herself down on that waste, and made up her mind to sleep if she might, and abide the new day there, and then to strive with the way once more, for belike, she thought, it may be fair to-morrow, and the sun shining. And as she was very weary with tramping the waste all day, she fell asleep at once, and slept the short night through.

But when she awoke, and saw what the new day was, her heart fell indeed, for now was she encompassed and shut in with a thick dark mist (though it seemed to be broad day), so that had there been aught to see she would not have seen it her own length away from her. So there she stood, hanging her head, and striving to think; but the master-thought of death drawing nigh scattered all other thoughts, or made them dim and feeble.

Long she stood there; but suddenly something came into her mind. She set her hand to the fair-broidered pouch which hung from Viridis' loin-girdle, and drew out thence flint and steel and tinder, which matters, forsooth, had served her before in the boat to make fire withal. Then she set her hand to her head, and drew forth the tress of hair which Habundia had given her, and which was coiled up in the crown of her own abundant locks which decked her so gloriously; she drew two hairs from the said tress, and held them between her lips while

she did up the tress in its place again, and then, pale and trembling, fell to striking a light, and when she had the tinder burning, she cried out: O wood-mother, wood-mother! How then may we meet again as thou didst promise me, if I die here in this empty waste? O wood-mother, if thou mightest but come hither for my deliverance!

Then she burned the hairs one after another, and stood waiting, but nought befell a great while, and her heart sickened, and there she stood like a stone.

But in a while, lo! there came as it were a shadow amidst the mist, or rather lying thereon, faint and colourless, and it was of the shape of the wood-mother, with girt-up gown and bow in hand. Birdalone cried aloud with joy, and hastened toward the semblance, but came to it no nigher, and still she went, and the semblance still escaped her, and she followed on and on; and this lasted long, and faster and faster must she follow lest it vanish, and she gathered her skirts into her girdle, and fell to running fleet-foot after the fleeing shadow, which she loved dearly even amidst the jaws of death; and all her fleetness of foot had Birdalone to put forth in following up the chase; but even to die in the pain would she not miss that dear shadow.

But suddenly, as she ran, the mist was all gone from before her, the sun shone hot and cloudless; there was no shadow or shape of Habundia there, nought but the blue lake and the ugly lip of that hideous desert, with the Sending Boat lying a half score yards from her feet; and behind her stood

up, as it were a wall, the mist from out of which she had come.

Forsooth Birdalone was too breathless to cry out her joy, but her heart went nigh to breaking therewith, and lovely indeed to her was the rippled water and the blue sky; and she knew that her wood-mother had sped a sending to her help, and she fell a-weeping where she stood, for love of her wise mother, and for longing to behold her: she stretched out her arms to the north quarter, and said blessings on her in a voice faint for weariness. Then she laid her down on the desert, and rested her with sleep, despite the hot sun, and when she awoke, some three hours thereafter, all was as before, save that the sky had now some light-flying clouds, and still was the wall of mist behind her. Wherefore she deemed she had yet time, and the blue rippling water wooed her much-besweated limbs; so she did off her raiment and took the water, and became happy and unweary therein. Then she landed and stood in the sun to dry her, and so, strengthened with that refreshing, clad her, and went aboard and did the due rites, and sped over the waters, and had soon lost sight of that ugly blotch on the fair face of the Great Water.

Here ends the Second Part of the Water of the Wondrous Isles, which is called Of the Wondrous Isles, and begins the Third Part of the said tale, which is called Of the Castle of the Quest.

THE WATER OF THE WONDROUS ISLES. THE THIRD PART: OF THE CASTLE OF THE QUEST.

CHAPTER I. BIRDALONE COMES TO THE CASTLE OF THE QUEST.

EMPTY was the day to Birdalone save for her thoughts, and she slept not a good while of the night. When she awoke in the morning there was no land before her, and she began to fear somewhat that so it might be many days, and that she might have to fare the water landless, and perchance till she starved for hunger; for now was there but little victual left of that which the kind Viridis had given her. So she wore the day somewhat uneasily, and by then night fell had eaten but little; yet was that little the last crumb and gobbet of her store. Wherefore it is no wonder though she were dismayed when she awoke early on the morrow, and beheld nought before her save the landless water.

But about noon she deemed she saw a little cloud in the offing that moved not as the other clouds, and she watched it closely at first, and it changed not any the more, and she grew weary of watching it and strove to sleep, turning her head to the after part of her ferry; and thus betwixt sleeping and waking she wore away three hours: then she stood up and looked ahead, and lo, the white cloud had taken shape, and was a white castle

far away (for the day was exceeding clear), sitting, as it seemed, on the very face of the water. The boat sped on swiftly thitherward, so that it was not right long ere Birdalone beheld the green shore on either side of the said castle, and at last, three hours before sunset, she was drawing nigh thereto, and beheld it all clearly, what it was.

It was brand-new, and was fair enough, builded part of stone and lime, part of framed work, but was but middling big. As she drew nigher yet, she saw that there were folk on the walls of it, and they seemed to see her, for a horn was winded from the battlement, and folk were running together to somewhither. And now was Birdalone come so near, that she saw the water-gate of the castle, and folk coming out thereby on to the landing-place; and she saw presently, that a very tall man with grizzled hair stood foremost of them, and he waved his hand to her, and spake something, but the wind bore the words away from her; yet she seemed to know that this folk would do her to wit that they would have none of her; and her heart died within her, so faint and hungry as she was.

Howsoever the ferry sped on its way swiftly, and in a minute or two had stayed itself at the landing-stair, whereabout were gathered a score of men, some armed some unarmed, and they seemed for the more part to be grey-headed and past middle-age.

Birdalone stood up in her craft, and the aforesaid tall grey man, who was unarmed, but clad in knightly raiment, stood on the stair and spake unto

her, and said: Lady, this is an house where women enter never since first the roof was done thereon, which forsooth was but a year ago. We will pray thee therefore to turn thy boat's head away, and seek some other lodging by the water, either eastward or westward.

Little knew Birdalone of worldly courtesy, or she had made him a sharp answer belike; but she only looked on him ruefully, and said: Good warrior, I am come a long way, and may not turn back from mine errand; and I am now lacking victual and hungry, and if ye help me not, it is like that I shall die. Much lieth on mine errand, if ye knew it. She was weeping-ripe, but refrained her tears, though her lip quivered. She stretched out her hands to the greybeard, and he looked on her and found her exceeding fair; and he deemed her to be guileless, both because of her simple speech and sweet voice, and the goodliness of her face and eyes. But he said: Lady, thine errand hath nought to do with it, it is thy womanhood that bars our door. For all we are bound by oath not to suffer a woman to abide in this castle till our lords take the bann off, and bid us open to women. She smiled faintly, and said: If I might but see thy lords then, since thou art not master here. He said: They are away, and will not be back till tomorrow morning; and I wot not the hour of their return. And yet, said he, I would we might help thee somewhat. O I pray thee, I pray thee! she said, or mine errand will come to nought after all.

Therewith came another man down the stair,

and stood by the old knight and plucked his sleeve, and fell to talk with him softly. This man was by his habit a religious, and was a younger man than the others, it might be of five and thirty winters, and he was fair of favour. While they spake together Birdalone sat her down again, and was well-nigh spent.

At last the old man spake: Damsel, he said, we deem we may suffer thee to enter the castle since thy need is so great, and have a meal's meat at our hands, and yet save our oath, if thou depart thence by the landward gate before sunset. Will this serve thee? Fair sir, said Birdalone, it will save my life and mine errand; I may say no more words for my faintness, else would I thank thee.

She stood up on her feet, and the old man-at-arms reached out his hand to her, and she took it and came her ways up the stair, but found herself but feeble. But the priest (forsooth he was chaplain of the castle) helped her on the other side. But when she stood on the level stones by the water-gate, she turned to the old man and said: One thing I will ask of thee, Is this place one of the Wondrous Isles? The elder shook his head. We know not the Wondrous Isles, said he; this castle is builded on the mainland. Her face flushed for joy at the word, and she said: One thing I will crave of thee, to wit, that thou wilt leave my barge lying here untouched till thy masters come back, and wilt give command that none meddle therewith.

He would have answered, but the priest brake in, and said: This will he do, lady, and he is the

castellan, and moreover he will swear to obey thee herein. And therewith he drew forth a cross with God nailed thereon, and the castellan swore on it with a good will.

Then the priest drew Birdalone on, and between them they brought her into the great hall, and set her down in a chair and propped her with cushions. And when she was thus at rest, she began to weep somewhat, and the castellan and the priest stood by and comforted her; for themseemed, despite her grief, that she had brought the sun into their house.

Next were victual brought unto her of broth and venison, and good wine and cates and strawberries; and she was not so famished but she might eat and drink with a good will. But when she was done, and had rested a little, the castellan stood up and said: Lady, the sun is gone off the western windows now, and I must save mine oath; but ere thou depart, I were fain to hear thy voice giving me pardon for my evil cheer and the thrusting of thee forth. And therewith he put one knee to the ground, and took her hand and kissed it. But Birdalone was grown merry again, and she laughed and said: What pardon thou canst have of me, kind knight, thou hast; but now methinks thou makest overmuch of me, because I am the only woman who hath come into thy castle. I am but a simple maiden, though mine errand be not little.

Forsooth she wondered that the stark and gruff old man was so changed to her in little space; for

nought she knew as yet how the sight of her cast a hot gleed of love into the hearts of them who beheld her.

Now Birdalone arose; but the castellan knelt at her feet, and kissed her hand again, and again, and yet again. Then he said: Thou art gracious indeed. But methinks the father here will lead thee out-a-gates; for he may show thee a lair, wherein thou shalt be safe enough to-night; and to-morrow may bring new tidings.

So the priest made obeisance to her and led her down the hall, and the castellan's eyes were following them till the screen hid them. The priest left her in the hall-porch a while, and went into the buttery, and came back with a basket of meat and drink, and they went forth at the great gate together, and there was the last of the sun before them.

CHAPTER II. OF BIRDALONE, AND HOW SHE RESTED THE NIGHT THROUGH IN A BOWER WITHOUT THE CASTLE OF THE QUEST.

ON a fair smooth road went they amidst of a goodly meadow-land, wherein were little copses here and there. When they were fairly out of the gate, the priest reached for Birdalone's hand, and she let him take it and lead her along thereby, thinking no evil; but he might scarce speak for a while, so great was the stir in his heart at the touch of her bare flesh. But Birdalone spake and said: Thou art kind, father, to lead me on my way thus.

He answered in a husky voice with his eyes cast down, and forsooth set on the feet of her: It is not far that I am leading thee; there is a broken cot by the copse at the turn of the road yonder, where thou mayst abide to-night; it is better lodging than none, evil as it is for such an one as thou. Birdalone laughed: Worse have I had, said she, than would be the copse without the cot. And she thought withal of the prison in the Isle of Increase Unsought.

Her voice seemed so cheery and friendly to the priest, that he shook off somewhat the moodiness of his desire, and looked up and said: I shall tell thee, lady, that I suppose thou hast more errand with my lords than to crave lodging of them despite the custom of the castle. Nay, I have an inkling of what thine errand may be, whereof more

anon; but now shall I tell thee what is best for thee to do so as to have speech of them the soonest. They have gone forth with some of our lads to gather venison, or it may be beeves and muttons for our victualling, and somewhat of battle may they have had on the way, for ill neighbours have we. But if they come back unfoughten they will be wending this road, and must needs pass by thy copse-side; and if thou be sleeping the noise of them will full surely awaken thee. Then all thou hast to do is to come forth and stand in the way before them, that they may see thee; and when once they have seen thee, how may they pass thee by unspoken with?

I thank thee heartily for thy rede, said Birdalone; but I would ask thee two things: first, what is the name of the castle behind us? and second, why have ye the custom of shutting the door upon women? Said the priest: The castle is called in this country-side, the White Ward by the Water; but within there we call it the Castle of the Quest; and thus is it called because my lords are seeking their loves whom they have lost; and they have sworn an oath that no woman shall enter therein till their own loves have trodden its floors.

Rose the heart of Birdalone at that word, and she deemed indeed that she was come thither whereas her she-friends would have had her. The priest beheld her and saw how her beauty was eked by that gladness, and he scarce knew how to contain himself, and might speak no word awhile;

then he said: Hearken further concerning thy matter; if my lords be tarried, and come not by matin-song, then I doubt not but the castellan will send folk to see to thee. He looked down therewith and said: I will come to thee myself, and will bring thee men-at-arms, if need be. But sometime to-morrow morning my lords will come, save mischief hath betid, which God forbid. And he crossed himself; then he looked up and full in her face, and said: But keep thine heart up; for whatsoever may betide, thou shalt not be left uncared for.

Said Birdalone: I see of thee that thou art become my good friend, and it rejoiceth my heart; I shall be well at ease to-night in thy cot, and to-morrow morn I shall be valiant to do thy bidding.

The sweetness of her speech so overcame him, that he but looked confusedly on her, as if he scarce heard her; and they went on together without more words, till he said: Here are we at the cot, and I will show thee thy chamber. So he led her to a little thatched bower, built with walls of wattle-work daubed with clay, which stood without the remnant of the cot: it was clean and dry, for the roof was weather-tight; but there was nought in it at all save a heap of bracken in a corner.

There stood the priest, still holding Birdalone's hand, and spake not, but looked about, yet always covertly on Birdalone; but in a while he let go her hand, and seemed to wake up, and said: This it is; a sorry place enough, were it even for a

gangrel body. Even so am I, quoth she laughing; and thou mayest look to it, that herein I shall rest full happily. Then he gave her a horn, drawing it from out of the basket of victual, which he now set down on the ground; and he said: If thou shouldst deem thee hard bestead, then wind this horn, and we shall know its voice up there and come to help thee. Now I give thee good-night.

She thanked him sweetly, and he went slowly out of the bower, but was scarce gone ere he came back again, and said: One thing I may perchance tell thee without drawing thine anger on my head; to wit, that I it was who said to the castellan that he should take thee in. Wilt thou say aught to this? She said: I will thank thee again and again; for it was the saving of my life and mine errand. And clearer is it now than ever that thou art a good friend unto me.

As she looked on him and caressed him with kind eyes, she saw that his brow was knit, and his face troubled, and she said to him: What ails thee? art thou wroth with me in any wise? O no, said he; how should I be wroth with thee! But there is a thing I would ask of thee. Yea, and what? said she. He said: Nay, I may not, I may not. It shall be for to-morrow, or another day. He spake it looking down, and in a broken voice; and she wondered somewhat at him, but not much, deeming that he was troubled by something which had nought to do with her, and which he might refrain from thinking of, even before a stranger.

But presently he caught her hand and kissed it, and bade her good-night again, and then went hastily out of the bower; and when he was well without, he muttered, but not so as she might hear him: Durst I have asked her, she would have suffered me to kiss her cheek. Alas! fool that I was!

Birdalone turned then to her bracken bed, and found it sweet and clean; and she was at rest and peace in her mind, albeit her body was exceeding weary. She felt happy in the little lonely cot, and her heart had gone out to the sweet meadow-land, and she loved it after all the trouble of the water; and herseemed that even now, in the dusk a-growing into dark, it loved and caressed her. So she laid her down, nor unclad herself at all, lest she should have to arise on a sudden, and show those tokens of the three damsels on her body.

A little while she lay there happily, hearkening the voices of the nightingales in the brake, and then she fell into a dreamless sleep, unbroken till the short night passed into day.

CHAPTER III. HOW BIRDALONE DIGHT HER FOR MEETING THE CHAMPIONS OF THE QUEST.

IT was the birds beginning their first song once more that awakened Birdalone before the sun was up; but she had no will to stir a while, whereas she felt so happy and restful; and that all the more when she remembered where she was, and told herself that her errand was now like to be accomplished; and she thought of her friends whom she had left on the Isle of Increase Unsought, and blessed them for their kindness, and the love of them was sweet to her heart, and amidst such thoughts she fell asleep again.

When she awoke thereafter there was a flood of sunshine lying on the meadows, and she sprang up in haste lest she had overslept herself, but when she was come out of the bower, she soon saw that the sunbeams lay low on the land, and that it was yet the first hour of the sun; so she turned about, and went through the copse to the other side, and lo! a little clear stream running before her. So she spake to herself softly and said: Fie on it! I was weary with the boat and my hunger last night, and I went to bed unwashen; and this morn I am weary for the foulness of my unwashen body. Unseemly it were to me to show myself sluttish before these lords; let me find time for a bath at least.

Therewith she went swiftly down to the water, undoing her girdle and laces by the way. She came to the stream and found it running between blue-

flowering mouse-ear and rushes, into a pool which deepened from a sandy shallow: so anon her borrowed raiment was lying on the grassy lip of the water, and she was swimming and disporting her in the pool, with her hair loose and wavering over her white back like some tress of the water-weed. Therein she durst not tarry long, but came hurrying out on to the grass, and clad herself in haste. But she covered not her shoulders with the golden gown, nor laced it over her bosom, so that Viridis' smock might be the plainer to see: which smock was noteworthy, for the breast thereof was broidered with green boughs, whence brake forth little flames of fire, and all so dainty-wrought as if the faery had done it.

Withal she gathered up the gown into her girdle, and let the skirt-hem clear her ankles, so that Atra's shoon might be seen at once; and they were daintily dight with window-work and broidery of gold and green stones, and blue. And forsooth it was little likely that any man should stand before her a minute ere his eyes would seek to her feet and ankles, so clean and kindly as they were fashioned.

Therewith she set her hands to her head, and trussed up her hair, and bound it closely to her head, so that it might hide no whit of her borrowed attire.

There she stood, with Aurea's collar lying on her dear neck, and Viridis' girdle about her shapen loins, and Atra's ring on her lovesome finger. And she hearkened a while and heard no sound of com-

ing men; and there came into her heart a gentle fear, which grieved her not. Over the water before her hung an eglantine bush, with its many roses either budding or but just out. Birdalone stole thither softly, and said, smiling: Nay, if I have nothing that is mine on my body, I will take this of the maiden's bath and make it mine. And therewith she plucked a spray of the bush and turned it into a garland for her head; and then when she had stood shyly a while in that same place, she turned and went swiftly to her place beside her night-harbour, and stood there hearkening with that sweet fear growing upon her, her colour coming and going, and her heart beating fast.

Now the thought of that kind priest who had led her to the bower last night came into her mind, and she wondered why he had been so troubled. And she thought, would those others be so kind to her, or would they deem her an impudent wench or a foolish, or pass her by?

Forsooth if any had passed her by it had been not that he should miss seeing her beauty, but that he should fear it, and deem her some goddess of the Gentiles of old time come before him for his ensnaring.

CHAPTER IV. AND NOW SHE MEETS THE CHAMPIONS.

NOW, as she stood hearkening, she deemed she heard something that was not so loud as the song of the blackbird in the brake, but further off and longer voiced: and again she hearkened heedfully, and the sound came again, and she deemed now that it was the voice of an horn. But the third time of her hearing it she knew that it was nought less; and at last it grew nigher, and there was mingled with it the sound of men shouting and the lowing of neat.

Then she stepped down to the very edge of the way, and now she saw the riding-reek go up into the clear air, and she said: Now are they coming without fail, and I must pluck up a heart; for surely these dear friends of my friends shall neither harm a poor maiden nor scorn her.

Soon came the leading beasts from out of the dust-cloud, and behind them was the glitter of spear-heads; and then presently was a herd of neat shambling and jostling along the road, and after-them a score or so of spearmen in jack and sallet, who, forsooth, turned to look on Birdalone as they passed by, and spake here and there a word or two, laughing and pointing to her, but stayed not; and all went on straight to the castle.

Thereafter was a void, and then came riding leisurely another score of weaponed men, whereof some in white armour; and amongst them were five sumpter horses laden with carcasses of venison.

And all these also went by and stayed not, though the most of them gazed on Birdalone hard enough.

Last of all came three knights riding, one with a gold surcoat over his armour, and thereon a cleft heart of red; the second with a green surcoat, and on the same a chief of silver with green boughs thereon, their ends a-flaming; but the third bore a black surcoat besprinkled with silver tears. And all these three rode bare-headed, save that the Black Knight bore an oak-wreath on the head.

Now did Birdalone take to her valiancy, and she stepped out into the road till she was but a ten paces from those men, who reined up when they beheld her; and she said in a clear voice: Abide, warriors! for if ye be what I deem you, I have an errand unto you.

Scarce were the words out of her mouth, ere all three had leapt off their horses, and the Golden Knight came up to her, and laid his hand upon her side, and spake eagerly and said: Where is she, whence thou gattest this gown of good web? And thou, said she, art thou Baudoin the Golden Knight? But he set his hand to the collar on her neck, and touched her skin withal, and said: This, was she alive when thou camest by it? She said: If thou be Baudoin the Golden Knight, I have an errand to thee. I am he, said the knight; O tell me, tell me, is she dead? Said Birdalone: Aurea was alive when last I saw her, and mine errand is from her to thee, if thou be verily her lover. Now with this word I pray thee to be content a while, said she, smiling kindly upon him, for needs must

I do mine errand in such wise as I was bidden. And thou seest also that thy friends would have a word of me.

Forsooth, they were thrusting in on her, and the Green Knight gat a hold of her left wrist in his left hand, and his right was on her shoulder, and his bright face close to her bosom whereon lay Viridis' smock; and thereat she shrank aback somewhat, but said: Sir, it is sooth that the smock is for thee when thou hast answered me a question or two. Meanwhile I pray thee forbear a little; for, as I trow, all is well, and thou shalt see my dear friend Viridis again.

He withdrew him a little, flushed and shamefaced. He was a young man exceeding beauteous, clear-skinned and grey-eyed, with curly golden hair, and he bore his armour as though it were silken cloth. Birdalone looked upon him kindly though shyly, and was glad to the heart's root that Viridis had so lovely a man to her darling. As for the Golden Knight, as Birdalone might see now, he stood a little aloof; he was a very goodly man of some five and thirty winters; tall he was, broad-shouldered and thin-flanked, black-haired, with somewhat heavy eyebrows, and fierce hawk-eyes; a man terrible of aspect, when one first beheld him.

Now when the Black Squire had hearkened Birdalone's word concerning Viridis, he threw himself down on the ground before her, and fell to kissing her feet; or, if you will, Atra's shoon which covered them. When she drew back a little, he rose on one knee and looked up at her with an eager

face, and she said: To thee also I have an errand from Atra, thy speech-friend, if thou be Arthur the Black Squire. He spake not, but still gazed on her till she reddened. She knew not whether to deem him less goodly than the other twain. He also was a young man of not over five and twenty years, slim and lithe, with much brown hair; his face tanned so dark that his eyes gleamed light from amidst it; his chin was round and cloven, his mouth and nose excellently fashioned; little hair he had upon his face, his cheeks were somewhat more hollow than round. Birdalone noted of his bare hands, which were as brown as his face, that they were very trim and shapely.

Now he rose to his feet, and the three stood together and gazed on her; as how might they do otherwise? Birdalone hung her head, and knew not what next to do or say. But she thought within herself, would these three men have been as kind to her as her three friends of the Isle, had she happened on them in like case as she was that time? And she settled with herself that they would have been no less kind.

Now spake the Golden Knight, and said: Will the kind maiden do her errand to us here and now? for we be eager and worn with trouble. Birdalone looked adown and was somewhat confused. Fair sirs, said she, I will do your will herein.

But the Black Squire looked on her and saw that she was troubled, and he said: Your pardon, fair fellows, but is it not so that we have an house somewhat anigh, not ill purveyed of many things? By

your leave I would entreat this kind and dear lady to honour us so much as to enter the Castle of the Quest with us, and abide there so long as she will; and therein may she tell us all her errand at her leisure; and already we may see and know, that it may not be aught save a joyous one.

Then spake the Golden Knight, and said: I will ask the lady to pardon me, and will now join my prayer to thine, brother, that she come home with us. Lady, he said, wilt thou not pardon me, that in the eager desire to hear tidings of my speech-friend I forgat all else.

And therewithal he knelt before her, and took her hand and kissed it; and for all his fierce eyes and his warrior's mien, she deemed him kind and friendly. Then needs must the Green Knight kneel and kiss also, though he had no pardon to crave; but a fair sweet lad she thought him, and again her heart swelled with joy to think that her friend Viridis had so dear a speech-friend to long for her.

Then came the turn of the Black Squire, and by then were the two others turned away a little toward their horses; and he knelt down on both knees before Birdalone and took her right arm above the wrist, and looked at the hand and kissed it as if it were a relic, but stood not up; and she stood bending over him, and a new sweetness entered into her, the like of which she had never felt. But as for the Black Squire, it seemed that one hand would not suffice him, and he took her left hand and fell to kissing it, and then both the hands together all over the backs of them, and then the palms thereof, and

he buried his face in the two palms, and held them to his cheeks; and the dear hands suffered it all, and consented to the embracing of his cheeks. But Birdalone deemed that this was the kindest and sweetest of the three kind warriors, and sorry she was when he let go her hands and stood up.

His face was flushed, but his speech calm, as he spake so that the other knights might hear him: Now will we straight to the castle, lady, and we will ask thee which of us three thou wilt honour by riding his horse there; shall it be Baudoin's bright bay, or Hugh's dapple-grey, or my red roan? And therewith he took her by the hand and led her toward the horses. But she laughed, and turning a little, pointed to the castle, and said: Nay, sweet lords, but I will fare afoot, such a little way as it is, and I all unwont to the saddle.

Spake the Green Knight: If that be so, lady, then shall we three walk afoot with thee. Nay, nay, she said; I have nought to carry but myself, but ye have your byrnies and your other armour, which were heavy for you to drag on afoot, even a little way. Moreover, I were fain to see you mount your horses, and ride and run about the meadow with tossing manes and flashing swords, while I trudge quietly toward the gate; for such things, and so beauteous, are all new unto me, as ye shall learn presently when I tell you my story. Do so much to pleasure me, kind knights.

The tall Baudoin nodded to her, smiling kindly, as much as to say that he thought well of her desire. But the Green Knight ran to his horse with a glad

shout, and anon was in the saddle with his bright sword in his fist; then he spurred, and went a-gallop hither and thither over the mead, making his horse turn short and bound, and playing many tricks of the tilt-yard, and crying, A Hugh, A Hugh, for the Green Gown! The Golden Knight was slower and more staid, but in manywise he showed his war-deftness, riding after Hugh as if he would fall on him, and staying his way just as it became perilous; and he cried, Baudoin, Baudoin, for Gold-sleeves! And all this seemed to Birdalone both terrible and lovely.

But for the Black Squire, he was slow to let loose Birdalone's hand; but thereafter he was speedy to vault into his saddle, and he made courses over the meadow, but ever came back to Birdalone as she went her ways, riding round and round her, and tossing his sword into the air the while and catching it as it fell. And no less lovely did this seem to Birdalone, and she smiled on him and waved her hand to him.

Going slowly in this wise, she came at last to the castle gate; and now had all those three out-gone her and stood afoot in the wicket to welcome her, and the Golden Knight, who was the oldest of the three, was the speaker of the welcome.

Over the threshold of the Castle of the Quest went Birdalone's feet then, and she was grown so happy as she had never deemed she should be all her life long.

CHAPTER V. BIRDALONE HAS TRUE TOKENS FROM THE CHAMPIONS OF THE QUEST.

NOW they brought Birdalone into a very fair chamber, where was presently everything she might need, save a tiring woman, which, forsooth, was no lack unto her, since never had she had any to help her array her body. So she did what she might to make herself the trimmer; and in a while came two fair swains of service, who brought her in all honour into the great hall, where were the three lords abiding her. There were they served well and plenteously, and fair was the converse between them; and in especial was the talk of Arthur the Black Squire goodly and wise and cheery, and well-measured; and the Green Knight's speech merry and kind, as of an happy child; and the Golden Knight spake ever free and kindly, though not of many words was he. And who was happy if Birdalone were not?

But when they had eaten and washed their hands, then spake the Golden Knight: Dear maiden, now are we ready to hear the innermost of thine errand, all we together, if thou wilt.

Birdalone smiled and reddened withal, as she said: Fair lords, I doubt not but ye are even they unto whom I was sent, but they who sent me, and who saved me from death and worse, bade me do mine errand in such a way, that I should speak with each one of you privily, and that for a token each should tell me a thing known but to him and

his love, and to me unto whom she hath told it. Now am I all ready to do mine errand thus, and no other wise.

Laughed they now, and were merry, and the Green Knight blushed like a maiden; forsooth like to his very speech-friend Viridis. But the Black Squire said: Fair fellows, get we all into the pleasance this fair morn, and sit there on the grass, and our sweet lady shall take us one after other into the plashed alley, and have the tokens of us.

Even so they did, and went into the pleasance, which was a goodly little garth south of the castle, grassed, and set thick with roses and lilies and gilly-flowers, and other fragrant flowers. There then they sat on the daisied greensward, the three lords together, and Birdalone over against them, and they three watched her beauty and loveliness and wondered thereat.

But she said: Now it comes to the very point of mine errand; wherefore I bid thee, Baudoin the Golden Knight, to come apart with me and answer to my questions, so that I may know surely that I am doing mine errand aright.

Therewith she arose to her feet, and he also, and he led her into the plashed alley, out of earshot of the other twain, who lay upon the grass biding their turn with but little patience.

But when those two were in the deep shade of the alley, Birdalone said: Thou must know, Sir Golden Knight, that the three lovers of you three were good to me in my need, and clad my nakedness from their very bodies, but this raiment they

lent me, and gave it not; for they bade me give it up piece by piece each unto the one who had given it to his love, whom I should know by the token that he should tell truly the tale of its giving. Now, fair sir, I know well, for I have been told, what was the tale of thy giving this golden gown to Aurea, and that same tale shalt thou now tell me, and if thou tell it aright, then is the gown thine. Begin, then, without more tarrying.

Lady, said the knight, thus it was: Aurea, my sweetling, abode with an ancient dame, a kinswoman of hers, who was but scantly kind to her; and on a day when we had met privily, and were talking together, my love lamented the niggard ways of her said kinswoman, and told how she had no goodly gown to make her fair when feasts were toward; but I laughed at her, and told her that so clad as she was (and her attire was verily but simple) she was fairer than any other; and then, as ye may wot, there was kissing and clipping between us; but at last, as from the first I meant it, I promised her I would purvey her such a gown as no lady should go with a better in all the country-side; but I said that in return I must have the gown she went in then, which had so long embraced her body and been strained so close to her body and her sides, and was as it were a part of her. That she promised me with kisses, and I went away as merry as a bird. Straightway thereafter I did do make this very gown, which thou bearest, dear maiden, and on the appointed day she came out to me unto the same place clad as she was before; but the new gown I

had with me. Hard by our trysting-place was a hazel-copse thick enow, for it was midsummer, and she said she would go thereinto and shift gowns, and bear me out thence the gift of the old clout (so she called it; laughing merrily). But I said: Nay, I would go into the copse with her to guard her from evil things, beasts or men; and withal to see her do off the old gown, that I might know before I wedded her whatlike stuffing and padding went to make the grace of her flanks and her hips. And again was she merry, and she said: Come, then, thou Thomas unbelieving, and see the side of me. So we went into that cover together, and she did off her gown before mine eyes, and stood there in her white coat with her arms bare, and her shoulders and bosom little covered, and she was as lovely as a woman of the faery. Then I made no prayer unto her for leave, but took my arms about her, and kissed her arms and shoulders and bosom all she would suffer me, for I was mad with love of her naked flesh. Then she did on this golden gown, and departed when she had given me the old clout aforesaid, and I went away with it, scarce feeling the ground beneath my feet; and I set the dear gown in a fair little coffer, and here in this castle I have it now, and many times I take it forth and kiss it and lay my head upon it. Now this is a simple tale, lady, and I am ashamed that I have made it so long for thee. And yet I know not; for thou seemest to me so kind and loving and true, that I am fain that thou shouldest know how sorely I love thy friend and mine.

Birdalone deemed Baudoin a good man indeed, and the tears came into her eyes as she answered and said: True is thy tale, dear friend, and I have deemed it rather short than long. I see well that thou art Aurea's very lover; and it joys me to think that thou, O terrible champion, art yet so tender and true. Now is the golden gown thine, but I will pray thee to lend it me a little longer. But this jewel shalt thou have from my neck here and now; and thou knowest whence it came, thine Aurea's neck forsooth.

Therewith she betook it him, and he held it in his hand doubtfully a while, and then he said: Dear maiden, I thank thee, but I will take this collar, and lay it in my casket, and be glad thereof; and that the more, as, now I look on thee, I see nought missing from the loveliness of thine own neck.

Go to thy fellows now, said Birdalone, and send me the Green Knight, the goodly lad. So went he, and presently came Hugh thither merry and smiling, and said: Thou hast been long about the first token, sweet mistress; I fear me I shall make no such goodly story as hath Baudoin. And yet, said she, Viridis' tale was the longest of all. I doubt thou mayst fail in the token. And she laughed; and he no less, and took her by the shoulders, and kissed her cheek frankly, and in such wise that she feared him nought, and said: Now that is to pay thee for thy gibe; what wouldst thou have of me? Said Birdalone: I would have thee tell me how it was that Viridis came by the

smock with the green boughs aflame, which now I bear upon me.

Hearken, darling lady, said he: On a day Viridis and I were alone in the meadow, and so happy, that we might find nought to do save to fall into strife together; and I said it to her, that she loved me not as well as I loved her; which, by the way, was no less than a lie, for of all things living she is the most loving, and when we be together she knoweth not how to make enough of me. Well, we fell to wrangling after the manner of lovers, till I, having nothing else to say, bade her remember that since we had first come to love each other, I had given her many things, and she had given me nothing. Lo, then! my dear, what an ill-conditioned lad was I. But, little as I meant it, she took it all amiss, and leapt up, and fell to running back home over the meadow; thou mayst think how easily I caught up with her, and how little loth she was to be dragged back by the shoulders. So when we were sitting again under the thorn-bush, we had well-nigh done our wrangle; but she unlaced her gown and drew down a corner thereof, to show me her shoulder, how I had hurt it e'en now; and forsooth some little mark there was on the rose-leaf skin; and that made good time for kissing again, as ye may well wot. Then she said unto me: And how may I, a poor damsel, give thee gifts, and my kindred all greedy about me? Yet would I give thee a gift, such as I may, if I but knew what thou wouldst take. Now my heart was afire with that kissing of her shoulder, and I

said that I would have that very same smock from her body, which then she bore, and that thereof I should deem that I had a rich gift indeed. What! said she, and wouldst thou have it here and now? And indeed I think she would have done it off her that minute had I pressed her, but I lacked the boldness thereto; and I said: Nay, but would she bring it unto me the next time we met; and forsooth she brought it folded in a piece of green silk, and dearly have I loved it and kissed it sithence. But as for thy smock, I had it fairly wrought and embroidered with the flaming green branches, as thou seest it, and I gave it to her; but not on the day when she gave me the gift; for the new one was long about doing. Now this is all the tale, and how Viridis might eke it into a long one, I wot not. But let it be, and tell me, have I won thy smock, or lost it?

Birdalone laughed on him and said: Well, at least thou shalt have it as a gift; and thou mayst call it given either by Viridis or me, which thou wilt. But with it goes another gift, which thou mayst have at once since thou must lend me the smock a little longer. And therewith she betook him her girdle, and he kissed it, but said: Nay, fair lady, this befitteth well the loveliness of thy body that thou shouldst wear it; and well it befitteth the truth and love of thy soul to ward it for me; I pray thee to keep it. Nevertheless, she said, I will not have it, for it goeth with mine errand that thou take it of me. Now I bid thee depart, and send hither thy fellow, the Black Squire.

Went he then, and anon comes the Black Squire, and now that he was alone with Birdalone this first time, he seemed moody and downcast, all unlike the two others. He stood a little aloof from Birdalone, and said: What wouldst thou ask of me? Her heart was somewhat chilled by his moodiness, for erst had she deemed him the kindest of the three; but she said: It is of mine errand to ask of thee concerning this foot-gear which Atra lent me until I give it unto thee, if thou be verily her lover. Said he: I was verily her lover. Birdalone said: Then canst thou tell me the manner of thy giving these fair shoon unto Atra?

He said: Even so; we were walking together in this country-side and came to a ford of the river, and it was somewhat deep and took me to over the knee, so I bore her over in my arms; then we went on a little further till we must cross the river back again in another place, and there the ford was shallower, and, the day being hot, Atra must needs wade it on her own feet. So she did off hosen and shoon, and I led her by the hand, and it took her but up to mid-leg. But when we came up out of the water and were on the grass again, I craved the gift of her foot-gear for the love of her, and she gave it straightway, and fared home barefoot, for it was over the meads we were wending in early summer, and the grass was thick and soft. But thereafter I did do make the fair shoon which thou hast on thy feet, and gave them to her. And, for a further token that my tale is true, I shall tell thee that the name of the first ford we waded that day

is the Grey-nag's Wade, and the second is called Goat Ford. This is all my tale, lady; is the token true?

True it is, squire, said Birdalone, and was silent awhile, and he also. Then she looked on him friendly, and said: Thou art out of heart as now, my friend. Fear not, for thou shalt without doubt see thy speech-friend again. Moreover here is a ring which she set upon my finger, bidding me give it thee. And she held it out unto him.

He took the ring, and said: Yea, it is best that I have it of thee, lest unluck come thereof. She saw trouble in his face, but knew not what to say to cheer him, and they stood silently facing one another for awhile. Then he said: Let us back to our fellows, and talk it over, what is now to be done.

So they went their ways to where lay the other two upon the green grass, and the Black Squire lay down beside them; but Birdalone stood before them and spake unto the three.

CHAPTER VI. HOW THE CHAMPIONS WOULD DO BIRDALONE TO BE CLAD ANEW IN THE CASTLE OF THE QUEST.

LORDS, she said, now is it clear by the tokens that mine errand is to you and none other; now therefore am I to tell you what to do to come unto your speech-friends and deliver them and bring them back hither. For this is their case, that they are in captivity in a wonder-isle of this great water, and it is called the Isle of Increase Unsought.

Spake the Golden Knight: Fair lady, we have heard before that our friends fared hence, or rather were taken hence over the water. And that is the cause why we builded this castle on the water's edge, on the very stead where was raised the pavilion, the house made for the ladies to abide therein the battle of the Champions. Since that time, moreover, many a barge and keel have we thrust out into the water, that we might accomplish the Quest whereunto we were vowed; but ever one way went our seafaring, that when we were come so far out into the water as to lose sight of land, came upon us mist, rose against us dusk and darkness; and then a fierce driving wind that drave us back to this shore. It is but six days ago since we tried this adventure for the last time, and belike the same shall befall us the next time we try it. Wherefore I must ask thee, lady, dost thou know any way whereby we may come to the said isle? For if thou

dost, full surely we will try it, whatsoever may be the risk thereby to our bodies or our souls.

Full surely I do, said Birdalone; else how had I come from thence hither mine own self? And therewith she told them of the Sending Boat, what it was, and how she had come all the way by means thereof from the Isle of Increase Unsought; and they all hearkened her heedfully, and wondered both at the sorcery, and the valiant heart of her who had driven it as she would in despite of the evil. But in the end she spake and said: Lords, ye have now heard some deal of my story, even that which concerns you thereof, and which must needs be told at once: wherefore doubtless ye shall fare unto your speech-friends by this ferry in the very wise that I shall show you; unless perchance ye deem that I have been lying and making light tales to you, as, sooth to say, I deem ye think it not.

Spake the Golden Knight: Damsel, in all wise we trow in thee and thy tale. And God forbid that we should tarry! Go we hence this very day.

Yea, but hearken, said the Black Squire: Is it not a part of this damsel's errand that she should deliver to us the raiment of our friends, which now she beareth on her own body, that we may bear it back unto them?

Sooth is that, said Birdalone, and ye may well wot that this may be nought but needful, whereas the said ladies be all beset by sorceries.

See ye then, fellows, said the Black Squire, it may not be to-day nor yet to-morrow that we may take the road. For ye wot that there is no woman's gear

in all the castle, and we must needs send otherwhere to seek it.

Look thou, maiden, said the Golden Knight, laughing, how duly this young knight thinketh of thee; whereas I, who am his elder, and should be wiser than he, am but heedless of thee. I pray thy pardon.

Moreover, said the Black Squire, there may well be wisdom in abiding; for it is to be thought that our dear loves considered this, and knew what the time of tarrying should be, and have so dight their matter as to fit in therewith; and I may not deem it of them that they would have us array this our dear sister and theirs in unseemly wise. Nay, for that would be an ill beginning of this deal of the Quest.

Now all yeasaid this gladly; and the Green Knight said: It were not so ill done that we should see more of our sister here ere we depart, and hear more of her tale; for meseemeth she began it erewhile but half-way. And he turned to Birdalone, and took her hand and caressed it.

Birdalone smiled on them somewhat shyly, and thanked them; but bade them spend as little time as might be on her arrayal. For, said she, though those ladies may well have reckoned on the time of the arrayal of my body, yet surely also they shall have reckoned with the eager fire of love in the hearts of you, and the haste it shall breed therein.

Well pleased were they with that word of hers, but none the less sent two sergeants and a squire with led horses unto the cheaping-town, a goodly

and great town hight Greenford, which was some twenty miles thence, with the errand to bring back with them a good shaper and embroideress, and sewing-women, and cloth and silk and linen, and all things needful.

As for jewels, each one of them was fain to give her something which he prized, and fair and rich were the gifts, though they had not been made for women. As a fair SS collar of gold, which the Golden Knight gave her, and a girdle of broad golden plates, wrought beauteously, which was the gift of the Black Squire. Albeit he did not offer to clasp it round her loins, as she deemed he would; for when the Green Knight brought his gift, a great gold ring, very ancient of fashion, he would have her turn back the sleeve from her fore-arm, that he might set his dwarf-wrought gold upon the bare flesh; neither did he refrain him from kissing it withal.

But the messengers came back with their work-women and stuffs early on the morrow; and now was changed all the manner of the womanless castle, and men were full merry therein.

CHAPTER VII. OF BIRDALONE, HOW SHE TOLD THE CHAMPIONS ALL HER TALE.

IT was a matter of eight days, the making of all Birdalone's raiment, and meanwhile she was ever with the three Champions, either all three together, or one or other of them. And as to their manners with her, ever was the Golden Knight of somewhat sober demeanour, as if he were an older man than he verily was. The Green Knight was for ever praising Birdalone's beauty to her face, and seemed to find it no easy matter to keep his eyes off her, and somewhat he wearied her with kisses and caresses; but a gay and sportive lad he was; and when she rebuked him for his overmuch fondness, as now and again she did, he would laugh at himself along with her; and in sooth she deemed him heart-whole, and of all truth to Viridis, and oft he would talk of her to Birdalone, and praise her darling beauty to her, and tell of his longing for his love aloof. Only, quoth he, here art thou, my sister, dwelling amongst us, and shedding thy fragrance on us, and showing to us, wilt thou, wilt thou not, as do the flowers, all the grace and loveliness of thee; and thou so tender of heart withal, that thou must not blame me overmuch if whiles I forget that thou art my sister, and that my love is, woe's me! far away. So thou wilt pardon me, wilt thou not? Yea, verily, said she, with a whole heart. Yet thou needest not reach out for my hand; thou hast had enough of it this morning. And she hid

it, laughing, in the folds of her gown; and he laughed also, and said: Of a truth thou art good in all wise, and a young fool am I; but Viridis shall make me wiser, when we come together again. Sawest thou ever so fair a damsel? Never, she said, and surely there is none fairer in all the world. So hold thee aloof now for a while, and think of her.

As for the Black Squire, hight Arthur, Birdalone was troubled for him, and he made her somewhat sad. True it is that he came not before her again so moody and downcast as when he was giving her the token; yet she deemed that he enforced himself to seem of good cheer. Furthermore, though he sought her company ever, and that lonely with him, and would talk with her almost as one man with another, though with a certain tenderness in his voice, and looking earnestly on her the while, yet never would he take her hand, or touch her in any wise. And true it is that she longed for the touch of his hand.

On the third day of her sojourn in the Castle of the Quest, Birdalone took heart at the much egging of her friends, as they sat all together in the meadow without the castle, to tell them all the story of her; she hid none, save concerning the wood-mother, for she deemed that her sweet friend would love her the better if she babbled not of her.

So the Champions hearkened her telling the tale in her clear lovely voice, and great was their love and pity for the poor lonely maiden. And in espe-

cial clear it was to see that they were sore moved when she told how she first came on the Sending Boat, and how the witch-wife tormented her innocent body for that guilt. Then Baudoin laid his hand upon her head, and spake: Poor child, much indeed hast thou suffered! and now I will say it, that it was for us and our loves that thou hast borne all this anguish of captivity and toil and stripes.

But Hugh leaned over to her, as she sat with her head hanging down, and kissed her cheek, and said: Yea! and I was not there to smite the head off that accursed one; and I knew nought of thee and thine anguish, as I took my light pleasure about these free meadows. And he turned very red, and went nigh to weep.

Arthur sat still with his eyes bent down on the ground, and he said nothing; and Birdalone glanced on him wistfully ere she went on with her tale. And she went on and told closely all that had happened unto her in the crossing of the water and on the Isle of Increase Unsought, and the other Wonder Isles; and she deemed it not too much that she should tell it twice over, nor they that twice over they should hearken it.

That same evening as Birdalone walked by herself in the castle pleasance, she saw Arthur peering about as if he were seeking someone; so she stood forth, and asked him was he seeking aught; and he said: Thee was I seeking. But she durst not ask him what he would, but stood silent and trembling before him, till he took her hand, and spake not loud but eagerly.

After what thou hast told us to-day, I seem to know thee what thou art; and I tell thee that it is a pain and grief to me to leave thee, yea to leave thee were it but for a minute. O I pray thee pity me for the sundering. And therewith he turned about and hastened into the castle. But Birdalone stood there with her heart beating fast and her flesh quivering, and a strange sweetness of joy took hold of her. But she said to herself that it was no wonder though she felt so happy, seeing that she had found out that, despite her fears, this one of her friends loved her no less well than the others. And then she spake it in a soft voice that she would indeed pity him for the sundering, yea, and herself also.

Nevertheless, when they met thereafter, his demeanour to her was none otherwise than it had been; but she no longer heeded this since now she trowed in him.

CHAPTER VIII. IN THE MEANWHILE OF THE DEPARTING OF THE CHAMPIONS, THEY WOULD PLEASURE BIRDALONE WITH FEATS OF ARMS AND GAMES OF PROWESS.

PASSED the days now speedily, and the three Champions did what they might for the solace of Birdalone. For they and their household showed her of arms, and they tilted together courteously; and the sergeants stood forth, and shot in the bow before her, till she herself by their bidding took the bow in hand, and shot straighter and well-nigh as hard as the best man there, whereat they marvelled, and praised her much.

Then the young men ran afoot before her for the prize of a belt and knife, and forsooth she wotted well that were she to run against them with trussed-up skirts she would bear off the prize; but she had no heart thereto, for amidst them all, and her new friendships, she had grown shamefast, and might play the wood-maiden no longer.

Yet twice the Champions fared further afield with her to show her some woodcraft; yet were not very free to go far, because of the ill neighbours whereof the chaplain had told her that first night of her coming.

And in all these pastimes, whatso they were, Birdalone bore herself well and merrily, and put from her the sorrow of the sundering, and the peril of her dear friends which grew now so near at hand.

The chaplain aforesaid, who hight Leonard, she fell in with not seldom; and he was ever meek and humble before her; and ever withal was sorrow easy to be seen in his countenance, and trouble withal; and she knew not how to help him, save by being courteous and kind with him whenso they met; but none the more might he pluck up cheerful countenance in answer to her kindness.

With Sir Aymeris, the grizzle-haired castellan, she foregathered also oft enough, and could not forbear some merry gibes with him concerning their first meeting, and how that she had been a burden and a terror to him; and these mocks she made him because she saw it liked him not ill to be mocked in friendly fashion; though forsooth betwixt the laughter he looked on her somewhat ruefully. And ever, ere he parted from her, he made occasion to kiss her hands; and she suffered it smiling, and was debonair to him; whereas she saw that he was of good will to her. In such wise then wore the hours and the days.

CHAPTER IX. BIRDALONE COMETH BEFORE THE CHAMPIONS IN HER NEW ARRAY.

NOW the time was come when Birdalone had all her gear ready, and the women were to abide in the castle as her serving-damsels while the Champions were away.

So now in the summer eve, an hour before sunset, Birdalone did on the richest of her new raiment, and came into the hall where sat the Three together, and Sir Aymeris with them. She was so clad, that she had on a green gown with broidered sleeves, and thereover a white cote-hardie welted with gold, and gold-embroidered; on her feet were gold shoon of window-work, pearled and gemmed; and on her head a rose garland; on her neck she bore the Golden Knight's collar; her loins were girt with the Black Squire's girdle; and on her wrist was the Green Knight's ancient gold ring; and she carried in her arms Aurea's gown and Viridis' shift and Atra's shoon.

Rather sunrise than sunset it seemed, as verily birdalone she came into the hall with bright eager eyes, and flushed cheeks, and countenance smiling with love. The men stood up all, and would come down from the dais to meet her; but she bade them go back, and sit each in his place till she stood before them.

Up the hall then she walked, and every step of hers seemed lovelier than the last, till she came to them and gave unto each his keepsake, and said:

Champions, now is mine errand all done, save that to-morrow I must show you the manner of the Sending Boat. Now there is nought save the darkness of the coming night to hinder you from this last deal of your Quest; and it is I that have brought you to this, and have done this good unto you, if no more good I do in the world. Wherefore I pray you to love me ever, and bear me ever in your minds.

They gazed on her, and were overcome by her loveliness and grace, and by the kindness and valiancy of her heart. Next arose the Golden Knight, Baudoin to wit, and took a cross from his breast, and held it up, and spake: Maiden, thou sayest well, and never shall we forget thee, or cease to love thee; and here I swear by God upon the Tree, that it shall be a light thing for me to die for thee, if in any need I find thee. Brethren, will ye not swear the same? And this is but thy due, maiden, for I declare unto thee, that when thou didst enter the hall e'en now, it was as if the very sun of heaven was coming in unto us.

Thereon the other two took the Rood and swore upon it: and Hugh was hushed and meek and sad-faced after he had sworn; but Arthur the Black Squire bowed down his head and wept, and his fellows marvelled nought thereat, neither did Bird-alone; and all her body yearned toward him to solace him.

Now turned Sir Baudoin to the castellan and said: Sir Aymeris, I will now swear thee to guard this lady as the apple of thine eye whiles we three

be away, and therein to spare neither thyself nor others. For thou seest well what grief it would be to us if she came to any harm.

And to me also, said the castellan. And therewith he swore upon the Rood, and then came round the table, and knelt before Birdalone, and kissed her hands.

Thereafter were they all silent a space; and then came Birdalone to the inner side of the table and sat betwixt Baudoin and Hugh. But the Black Squire took up the word and spake: Birdalone, sweet child, one thing is to be said, to wit, that it were well that thou keep within walls while we be away; or at least that thou go but a little beyond the castle, and never but within a half bowshot, save thou be well accompanied. For there be men of violence dwelling no great way off, reivers and rovers, who would be well pleased to take from us anything which we deem dear; besides others who would think the lifting of such a jewel good hap indeed. Sir Aymeris, have a care of the Red Knight; and if thou mightest come by a few more stout lads, to wage them, it were well.

Birdalone heeded not what the castellan answered, such a shaft of joy went to her heart when she heard that friend speak her own name in such wise as he had never done erst, and that before them all. She but murmured some yeasay to that which Arthur had spoken unto her, and then she held her peace for the sweetness of that moment.

So there they sat and talked a while in dear and pleasant converse; and Hugh fell to asking her

of her life in the House under the Wood, and she answered all frankly and simply, and the more she told the dearer she seemed to them.

Thus drew night in, till folk came flockmeal into the hall; for needs must be feast and banquet for triumph of the furtherance of the Quest; and the most of men were merry; but somewhat sober were all the three Champions, so that whoso ran might read it in their faces. As for Birdalone, she showed cheerful to all that folk which loved her and praised her; but inwardly sorrow had come home to her heart.

CHAPTER X. THE CHAMPIONS GO THEIR WAYS IN THE SENDING BOAT.

WHEN the sun was arisen on the morrow the three Champions went down to the landing-place, and there was none with them; for they had given command that no man should pry into their doings. Thither to them cometh Birdalone, clad no more in her gay attire, but in a strait black coat and with unshod feet; and she looked no sorrier than she was.

By Birdalone's rede the Champions bore down in their own hands the victual and weapons and armour that they needed for the voyage; for she knew not but that the Sending Boat might take it amiss that any should touch her save the senders. And when they had done lading her, then all four stood together by the water's edge, and Birdalone spake to her friends, and again bade them beware of the wiles of the Isle of Nothing; and again she told them of the woful images of the Isle of Kings and the Isle of Queens, and the strange folk of the Isle of the Young and the Old. Then she said: Now when ye come to the Isle of Increase Unsought, what think ye to do? Said the Green Knight: If I might rule, we should go straight up to the witch sitting in her hall, as thou toldest us, my dear, and then and there smite the head from off her. His eyes flashed and his brow knitted, and so fierce he looked that Birdalone shrank back from him; but the Black Squire smiled and said: It may come to the smiting off of heads in the end;

yet must we so fashion our carving, that it avail us for the freeing of our friends; else may the witch die, and the secret of the prison-house die with her. How sayest thou, dear Birdalone?

She reddened at the caress of his voice, and answered: By my rede ye shall seek and find your speech-friends ere ye make open war upon the witch; else may her malice destroy them ere ye undo her. Her face flushed yet more as she spake again: But concerning all things, I deem that Atra may give you the best rede, when ye have met the loves; for that she knoweth more of the isle and its guiles than the others.

Quoth Baudoin: Herein is wisdom, sweet maiden, for as guileless as thou mayst be; and so far as we may we shall follow thy rede; but all lieth in the fathom of the coming time. And now this moment is the moment of sundering and farewell.

Came he then to Birdalone and took his two hands about her head, and lifted her face unto him, and kissed it kindly, as a father might kiss a daughter, and said: Farewell, dear child, and take heed to the word that Arthur spake yesterday, and go not from the castle even a little way save with good and sure company.

Then came Hugh to her, and took her hand somewhat timidly; but she put up her face to him in simple wise, and he kissed either cheek of her, and said no more than: Farewell, Birdalone!

Lastly came Arthur, and stood before her a little; and then he knelt down on the stones before her

and kissed her feet many times, and she shuddered and caught her breath as they felt his kisses; but neither he nor she spake a word, and he stood up and turned away at once toward the Sending Boat, and boarded her first of the three; and the others followed straightway.

Thereafter the Champions bared each an arm, and let blood flow thence into a bowl, and reddened stem and stern of their barge, and then all three spake the spell together thus, as Birdalone had taught them:

> The red raven-wine now
> Hast thou drunk, stern and bow:
> Wake then, and awake,
> And the northern way take!
> The way of the Wenders forth over the flood,
> For the will of the Senders is blent with the blood.

Went all as before thereafter, that the Sending Boat stirred under them, and then turned about and pointed her bows to the northward, and sped swiftly over the waters. It was a fair sunny day, with no cloud, nought save the summer haze lying on the lake far away. Birdalone stood watching the speeding of the boat, till she could see it no longer, not even as a fleck on the face of the waters. Then she turned away and went toward her chamber, saying to herself that the sundering was easier to bear than she had deemed it would be, and that she had a many things to do that day. But when she came into her chamber, and shut the door, she looked about her on the things which had grown so familiar to her in these few latter days, and she

stood watching the bright sunshine that streamed across the floor and lay warm upon her feet; then she took three steps toward the window, and saw the lake lying all a-glitter under the sun, and her heart failed her withal, and she had no might so much as to think about her sorrow and caress it, but fell down where she was swooning on to the floor, and lay there, while all the house began to stir about her.

Here ends the Third Part of the Water of the Wondrous Isles, which is called Of the Castle of the Quest, and begins the fourth Part of the said tale, which is called Of the Days of Abiding.

THE WATER OF THE WONDROUS ISLES. THE FOURTH PART: OF THE DAYS OF ABIDING.

CHAPTER I. OF BIRDALONE'S GRIEF; AND OF LEONARD THE CHAPLAIN.

NOW came Birdalone to herself, and that was but little joy unto her, and she yet lay still on the floor for a while, for she loathed the hour that was to come. Then the life stirred in her, and whereas she would not that her women should find her there, she stood up, and clad herself somewhat more seemly; yet she did on her black raiment; and determined in her mind that nought would she wear save black unadorned while her friends were away.

She betook her now to the chamber where her women were gathered together, and watched them working a while, but spake nought. Then she went her ways into the pleasance, and paced the plashed alley up and down, letting the tears run down from her as they would. Then she turned back into the castle, and went out-a-gates and walked over the meadow a little, and might well have gone further than wisdom would. But the castellan espied her from a window, and came hurrying out after her, and with many prayers for pardon, brought her back again, babbling to her by the way; but not a word might he get from her; and when he came into the hall with her, and,

after his wont, knelt down to kiss her hands, she caught them away from him peevishly, and was sorry for it thereafter.

Long she sat in the hall, scarce moving, till she heard one entering from the screen, and lo it was Leonard the chaplain. He came her way, and showed her rueful countenance; and pity of him smote her, and she remembered therewith how they first went out of gates together; and at the thought thereof her tears brake forth again, but she made him a sign with her hand to sit down beside her, and he did so; and when she might for her weeping, she looked kindly on him, and he fell to talk, making as if he noted not her tears and sorrow; but she answered him little, for she had shame to begin the talk concerning the Champions and their Quest, and their departure; yet might she not bring her tongue to make any speech else. But presently he took up the word, and asked her how long a while she deemed they would be away, and she answered, smiling on him for thanks, and having reckoned the days on her fingers: If all go better than well, they may be back in ten days' time. Said the chaplain: There be longer whiles of waiting in most men's lives. Yea, she said, but this is the delay at the best; it may be far longer; for how may we tell what haps may be?

Yea, said Leonard, shall we then call it twenty days, or thirty? Forsooth, that may be long for thee; though there be some who must needs endure hope deferred a deal longer. But it may

run out longer than even thirty days, thy waiting-tide.

She answered not, and he said: Whenso the time hangs heavy on hand with thee, if thou hast will to fare abroad out of the castle, I shall be ever at hand to guide thee. Indeed, I wot that the castellan will be loth to let thee go; but he is old and straitlaced: and yet withal he wotteth, as do we all, that there is now little peril or none were we to fare a five miles or more, whereas we are as good as at peace for the last five days with all save the Red Knight, and of him we wot that he is gone into another land with as many of his folk as be not needed for the warding of his hold.

I thank thee, said Birdalone, but it is like to be my will not to fare out-a-gates till the Champions come back home. I was glad e'en now when the castellan fetched me in again: to say sooth, fear of peril had just entered my heart when he came up with me.

The priest seemed somewhat chapfallen at her answer. He spake little more, and presently he stood up, made his obeisance, and departed.

CHAPTER II. BIRDALONE LEARNETH LORE OF THE PRIEST. TEN DAYS OF WAITING WEAR.

WORE that day and the next, and Birdalone fell to talking with her women, whereof were five now left; and four of them were young, the eldest scarce of thirty summers, and the fifth was a woman of sixty, both wise and kind. All these told her somewhat of their own lives when she asked them; and some withal told of folk whom they had known or heard tell of. And well pleased was Birdalone to hear thereof, and learn more of the ways of the world, and quick-witted she was at the lesson, so that she needed not to ask many questions.

Furthermore, she took to her broidering again, and fell to doing a goodly pair of shoon for Atra, since she had worn those borrowed ones somewhat hardly. And the women wondered at her needlework, so marvellous fine as it was, and how that in little space of time were come flowers and trees, and birds and beasts, all lovely; and they said that the faery must have learned her that craft. But she laughed and reddened, and thought of the wood-mother; and, sitting there within the four walls, she longed for the oak-glades, and the wood-lawns, and for the sight of the beasts that dwelt therein.

Again she fell in with Leonard the priest, and he asked her could she read in a book, and when she said nay, he offered to teach her that lore, and

she yeasaid that joyously; and thenceforth would she have him with her every day a good while; and an apt scholar she was, and he no ill master, and she learned her A B C speedily.

Now it was the ninth day since the Champions were gone, and all that time she had not been out-a-gates; and after the first two days, had enforced herself to fill up her time with her work as aforesaid: but this last day she might do but little, for she could not but take it for sure that the morrow would be the day of return; nay, even she deemed that they might come in the night-tide; so that when she went to bed, though she was weary, she would wake if she might, so that it was nigh dawn ere she fell asleep.

Some three hours after she woke up, and heard a sound of folk stirring in the house, and the clashing of weapons; and the heart leapt in her, and she said: They are come, they are come! Nevertheless she durst not get out of bed, lest her hope had beguiled her; and she lay awake another hour, and no tidings came to her; and then she wept herself to sleep; and when she awoke once more, she found that she must have wept sleeping, for the pillow beside her face was all wet with the tears.

The sun was high now, and his beams were cast back from the ripple of the lake, and shone wavering on the wall of the chamber, the window whereof gave on to the water. Then came a hand on the latch of the door, and she started, and her heart grieved her; but it was one of the women who

opened, and came in, and Birdalone rose up sitting in her bed, and said faintly, for she could scarce speak: Is any tiding toward, Catherine? The maid said: Yes, my lady; for early after sunrise came weaponed men to the gate, and would sell us beeves; and my lord, Sir Aymeris, must needs go forth and chaffer with them, though belike they had been lifting what was neither ours, nor theirs, nor the neighbours'. Maybe Sir Aymeris looked to buy tidings from them as well as beef. Anyhow they departed when they had gotten their money and drunk a cup. And now it is said that the Red Knight hath been hurt in some fray, and keepeth his bed; wherefore the land shall have peace of him awhile. Said Birdalone: I thank thee, good Catherine; I shall lie a little longer; depart now.

The woman went her ways; and when she was gone, Birdalone wept and sobbed, and writhed upon her bed, and found no solace to her grief. But she arose and paced the chamber, and sithence looked out of the window over the empty water, and wept again. Then she said: Yet they may come ere noon, or it may be ere evening, or perchance to-morrow morning. And she stayed her weeping, and was calmer. But still she walked the floor, and whiles looked out of window, and whiles she looked on her limbs, and felt the sleekness of her sides, and she said: O my body! how thou longest!

But at last she clad herself in haste, and went stealthily from the chamber, as if she feared to meet anyone; and she stole up to the tower-top that

was nighest, and looked through the door on to the leads, and saw no one there; so she went out, and stood by the battlement, and gazed long over the water, but saw neither boat nor burning mountain coming towards her.

CHAPTER III. NOW WOULD BIRD-ALONE RIDE ABROAD.

AFTER a while she came down again, and went to the women, and sat working with them a while, and so wore away two hours. Then she sent for the priest and had her lesson of him; and when she had been at it another two hours, she bade him begin and learn her writing; and nought loth he was thereto; forsooth he had been longing to pray her to suffer him learn her, but durst not. For in such teaching needs must he sit full nigh to her, and watch her hands, and her fingers striving to shape the letters; nay, whiles must he touch her hand with his, and hold it. Wherefore now he promised himself a taste of Paradise. Withal he was full meet to learn her, whereas he was one of the best of scribes, and a fair-writer full handy.

So they fell to the lesson, and she became eager thereover, and learned fast, and clave to the work, while his soul was tormented with longing for her. And thus wore a three hours, and then suddenly she looked up wearily from her work, and her trouble was awake, and the longing for her speech-friend, and she gave the priest leave for that day, but suffered him to kiss her hand for wages.

Then she hurried up to the tower-top, when the afternoon was wearing into evening; and abode there a long while looking over the waters, till it began to dusk, and then came down miserably and went to her women.

The next day was like unto this; nought betid, and she wore the hours whiles going up to the tower-top and looking over the lake, whiles broidering amidst her maids, whiles learning her clerk's work with Sir Leonard, but ever eating her heart out with her longing.

On the third of these days she called the castellan to her for a talk, and asked him what he thought of it, this delay of his lords' return. Quoth the greyhead: My lady, we may not wonder if they be tarried for a few days; for this is an adventure on which they have gone, and many haps betide in such tales. Now I beseech thee torment not thyself; for the time is not yet come for thee even to doubt that they have miscarried.

His words solaced her much for that time, whereas she saw that he spake but the sooth; so she thanked him, and smiled upon him kindly; and he was ravished thereat, and was for kneeling before her at once and kissing her hands after his wont; but she smiled again and refrained him, and said: Nay, not yet, fair friend; that is for the departure, and I have yet a word to say unto thee: to wit, that I long to go out-a-gates, and it will solace me and give me patience to abide the coming of my friends. For thou must know, Sir Aymeris, that I was reared amidst the woods and the meadows, with the burning of the sun, and the buffets of the wind; and now for lack of some deal of that am I waxing white and faint. And thou wouldst not have me falling sick on thine hands now, wouldst thou?

Nay, surely, lady, said Sir Aymeris; this very day I will ride out with thee; and two score or more of weaponed men shall ride with us for fear of mishaps. Said Birdalone, knitting her brows: Nay, knight, I need not thy men-at-arms; I would fain go free and alone. For hast thou not heard how that the Red Knight is hurt and keepeth his bed? So what peril is there? Said Sir Aymeris: Yea, lady; but the Red Knight is not the only foe, though he be the worst: but it may well be that the story is but feigned, for the said enemy hath many wiles. And look you, kind lady, it is most like that by now he hath heard how in my poor castle is kept a jewel, a pearl of great price, that hath not its like in the world, and will encompass the stealing of it if he may.

Laughed Birdalone, and said: But how if the said jewel hath a will, and legs and feet thereto, and is ready to take the peril on her, and will wend out-a-gates if she will? What wilt thou do then, lord? Then, said the castellan, I shall fetch thee back, and, though it be a grief to me, shall have thee borne back perforce if nought else may do. For so the oath sworn to my lords compelleth me.

Again laughed Birdalone, and said: Hearken, whereto cometh all this kneeling and hand-kissing! But bear in mind, fair lord, how once on a time thou wouldst have me out-a-gates, would I, would I not, and now, will I, will I not, thou wouldst keep me within; so have times changed, and mayhappen they may change yet again. But tell me, am I mistress over my women to bid

them what I will? Certes, said he, and over all of us. Said she: If then I bade them, some two or three, come with me into the meadows and woods a half day's journey for our disport, how then? For that once, said Sir Aymeris, I should bid them disobey their lady. Said Birdalone: And how if they disobeyed thee, and obeyed me? Quoth Sir Aymeris: If they bring thee back safe, they may chance to sing to the twiggen fiddle-bow, that they may be warned from such folly; but if they come back without thee, by All-hallows the wind of wrath shall sweep their heads off them!

Birdalone flushed red at his word, and was silent a while; then she said, making cheerful countenance again: Thou art a hard master, lord castellan; but I must needs obey thee. Therefore I will take thy bidding, and ride abroad in such wise that I shall scare the land with an army, since no otherwise may I look on the summer land. But to-day I will not go, nor to-morrow belike; but some day soon. And in good sooth I thank thee for thy heedful care of me, and wish I were better worth it. Nay, nay, thou shalt not kneel to me, but I to thee: for thou art verily the master.

Therewith she rose from beside him, and knelt down before him and took his hand and kissed it, and went her ways, leaving him ravished with love of her. But now she had no scorn of him, but deemed, as was true, that he was both valiant and trusty and kind, and she thanked him in her heart as well as in words.

CHAPTER IV. OF BIRDALONE'S FARING ABROAD.

INDEED Birdalone longed on any terms to be out-a-gates and to have some joy of the summer; for now she began to see that she might have to abide some while ere her friends should come to her in the Castle of the Quest; and she was angry with herself that her longing was thus wasting her, and she rebuked herself and said: Where is now that Birdalone who let but few days go by without some joyance of the earth and its creatures? she who bore lightly the toil of a thrall, and gibes and mocking and stripes? Surely this is grievous folly, that I should be worsened since I have come to be the friend of gentle ladies, and noble champions, and mighty warriors. Had it not been better to have abided under the witchwife's hand? For not every day nor most days did she torment me. But now for many days there has been pain and grief and heart-sickness hour by hour; and every hour have I dreaded the coming of the next hour, till I know not how to bear it.

So she strove with herself, and became of better heart, and set herself strongly to the learning of the clerkly lore; she gathered her wits together, and no longer looked for every day and every hour to bring about the return of the Champions, nor blamed the day and the hour because they failed therein, and in all wise she strove to get through the day unworn by vain longing.

Wherefore, on a day when three whole weeks were gone since the day of departure, she was glad when the castellan came to her and said: Lady, these two days I have had men out to spy the land, and their word goes that nought is stirring which a score of us well-armed might have cause to fear; wherefore to-morrow, if it be thy will, we shall bring thee out-a-gates, and so please thee, shall be in no haste to come back, but may lie out in the wild-wood one night, and come back at our leisure on the morrow of to-morrow. How sayest thou of thy pleasure herein?

She thanked him, and yeasaid it eagerly, and next morning they set forth; and Birdalone had with her three of the women, and they had sumpter-beasts with them, and tents for Birdalone and her maids.

So they rode by pleasant ways and fair meadows, and the weather was good, for it was now the first days of July, and all was as lovely as might be; and for that while Birdalone cast off all her cares, and was merry, and of many words and sweet; and all the folk rejoiced thereat, for all loved her in the Castle of the Quest, besides those one or two that loved her overmuch.

Rode they thus a twelve miles or more, and then they came, as their purpose was, to the beginning of a woodland plenteous of venison, and they hunted here, and Birdalone took her part therein, and all praised her woodcraft; albeit because of her went a head or two free that had fallen else, whereas of the carle hunters were some who deemed the body of her better worth looking on than the quarry.

Howsoever, they slew of hind and roe and other wood-cattle what they would, some deal for their supper in the wilderness, some to bear home to the castle. But when night was nigh at hand they made stay in a fair wood-lawn about which ran a clear stream, whereby they pitched the ladies' tent; and Birdalone and hers went down into the water and washed the weariness off them; and her ladies wondered at the deftness of Birdalone's swimming; for they bathed in a pool somewhat great into which the stream widened, so that there was space enough for her therein.

By then they were washen and clad goodly in raiment which they had brought on the sumpters, the men had lighted fires and were cooking the venison, and anon there was supper and banquet in the wildwood, with drinking of wine and pleasant talk and the telling of tales and singing of minstrelsy; and so at last, when night was well worn, and out in the open meadows the eastern sky was waxing grey, then Birdalone and her ladies went to bed in their fair tents, and the men-at-arms lay down on the greensward under the bare heaven.

CHAPTER V. SIR AYMERIS SHOWETH BIRDALONE THE MOUNTAINS AFAR OFF.

WHEN it was morning and they arose, the day was as fair as yesterday, and folk were even as joyous as they had been then, all but Birdalone, and she was silent and downcast, even when she came forth from the fresh water into the sweetness of the midsummer wood. She had dreamed in the night that she was all alone in the Castle of the Quest, and that her old mistress came to her from out of the Sending Boat to fetch her away, and brought her aboard, and stripped her of her rich garments and sat facing her, drawing ugsome grimaces at her; and she thought she knew that her friends were all dead and gone, and she had none to pity or defend her. Then somehow were they two, the witch and she, amidmost of the Isle of Nothing, and the witch drew close anigh her, and was just going to whisper into her ear something of measureless horror, when she awoke; and the sun was bright outside the shaded whiteness of her tent; the shadows of the leaves were dancing on the ground of it; the morning wind was rustling the tree-boughs, and the ripple of the stream was tinkling hard by. At first was Birdalone joyous that what she had awakened from was but a dream; but presently she felt the burden of her longing, and she said to herself that when they came back to the castle they should find tidings, and that she should know either that her friends were indeed dead, or

that they were come back again alive and well. And then she thought within herself, suppose the three Champions and their loves were dead and gone, how would she do with those that were left her, as Sir Aymeris, and Leonard the priest, and her women? and her soul turned with loathing from a life so empty as that would be; and yet she blamed herself that she was so little friendly to these lesser friends, whom forsooth she loved because of her love for the greater ones. So, as abovesaid, she was troubled and silent amongst the joy of the others.

That saw Sir Aymeris the castellan; and when they had broken fast and were getting to horse, he came to her and said: Lady, the day is yet young, and if we fetch a compass by a way that I wot of, we shall see places new to thee, and may-happen somewhat wonderful, and yet come home timely to the castle. Wilt thou?

Birdalone was still somewhat distraught, but she knew not how to naysay him, though at heart she would liefer have gone back to the castle by the shortest way. So folk brought her her palfrey, and they rode their ways, the castellan ever by her side. And by fair ways indeed they went, and so joyous was all about them, that little by little Birdalone's gladness came back to her, and she made the most of it to be as merry of seeming as she might be.

Now they rode fair and softly by thicket and copse and glade of the woodland, following up the stream aforesaid for the more part, till at last the trees failed them suddenly, and they came forth

on to a wide green plain, all unbuilded, so far as their eyes could see, and beyond it the ridges of the hills and blue mountains rising high beyond them.

When Birdalone's eyes beheld this new thing, of a sudden all care left her, and she dropped her rein, and smote her palms together, and cried out: Oh! but thou art beautiful, O earth, thou art beautiful! Then she sat gazing on it, while the greyhead turned and smiled on her, well pleased of her pleasure.

After a while she said: And might we go nigher? Yea, certes, said he, yet I doubt if thou wilt like it the better, the nigher thou art. Ah! she said, but if I were only amidst it, and a part of it, as once I was of the woodland!

So thitherward they rode over the unharvested mead, and saw hart and hind thereon, and wild kine, and of smaller deer great plenty, but of tame beasts none; and the hills were before them like a wall. But as they drew nigher, they saw where the said wall of the hills was cloven by a valley narrow and steep-sided, that went right athwart the lie of the hills; the said valley was but little grassed, and the bare rocks were crow-black. When they had gone a little further, they could see that the ground near the foot of the hills rose in little knolls and ridges, but these were lower and fewer about the entry into that valley. Also presently they came upon a stream which ran out of the said valley, and Sir Aymeris said that this was the water whereby they had lain last night; albeit here it was little indeed.

Now when they had ridden some five miles over the plain, they came amongst those knolls at the mouth of the valley, and Sir Aymeris led Birdalone up to the top of one of the highest of them, and thence they could look into that dale and see how it winded away up toward the mountains, like to a dismal street; for not only was it but little grassed, but withal there was neither tree nor bush therein. Moreover, scattered all about the bottom of the dale were great stones, which looked as if they had once been set in some kind of order; and that the more whereas they were not black like the rocks of the dale-side, but pale grey of hue, so that they looked even as huge sheep of the giants feeding down the dale.

Then spake Birdalone: Verily, sir knight, thou saidst but sooth that I should see things new and strange. But shall we go a little way into this valley to-day? Nay, lady, said Sir Aymeris, nor to-morrow, nor any day uncompelled; neither shall we go nigher unto it than now we be. Wherefore not? said Birdalone, for meseemeth it is as the gate of the mountains; and fain were I in the mountains.

Lady, said the castellan, overmuch perilous it were to ride the valley, which, as thou sayest, is the very gate of the mountains. For the said dale, which hight the Black Valley of the Greywethers, hath a bad name for the haunting of unmanlike wights, against which even our men-at-arms might make no defence. And if any might escape them, and win through the gates and up into the moun-

tains, I wot not if suchlike devils and things unkent be there in the mountain-land, but of a sooth there be fierce and wild men, like enough to devils, who know no peace, and slay whatsoever cometh unto them, but if they themselves be slain of them.

Well, said Birdalone, then to-day, at least, we go not into the dale; but knowest thou any tales of these wild places? Many have I heard, said he, but I am an ill minstrel and should spoil them in the telling. Ask them of Sir Leonard our priest, he knoweth of them better than others, and hath a tongue duly shapen for telling them.

Birdalone answered nought thereto; she but turned her horse's head and rode down the knoll; and so they came unto their company, and all went their ways toward the Castle of the Quest.

Nought befell them on their way home; but the nigher they came to the castle the more pensive waxed Birdalone, and, though she hid it, when they were come to the gate she scarce had her wit; for it was as if she thought to have one rushing out and crying: Tidings, tidings! they are come.

Nowise it so befell; they were no more come than was the Day of Doom. And a little after they were within gates; it was night, and Birdalone crept wearily up to her chamber, and gat to bed, and so tired was she that she fell asleep at once and dreamed not.

CHAPTER VI. BIRDALONE HEARETH TELL TALES OF THE BLACK VALLEY OF THE GREYWETHERS.

ON the morrow was Birdalone heavier of heart than ever yet, and wearier for tidings; and she wondered how she could have been so joyous that day in the wildwood. Yet she thought much of the Valley of the Greywethers, and that solaced her somewhat after a while, so sore she longed to go thither; and, as 'tis said, one nail knocks out the other. So that morning, when she had had her lesson of priest Leonard, she spake thereof to him, and told him what Sir Aymeris had said concerning his knowledge thereof; and she asked him what he knew.

I have been there, said he. She started at that word and said: Did aught of evil befall thee?

Nay, said he, but a great fear and dread hung about me; and 'tis said that they try their luck overmuch who go thither twice.

Birdalone said: Tell me now of the tales that be told of that valley. Quoth Leonard: They be many; but the main of them is this: that those Greywethers be giants of yore agone, or landwights, carles, and queans, who have been turned into stone by I wot not what deed; but that whiles they come alive again, and can walk and talk as erst they did; and that if any man may be so bold as to abide the time of their awakening, and in the first moment of their change may frame words that crave the fulfilment of his desire, and if therewith he be

both wise and constant, then shall he have his desire fulfilled of these wights, and bear his life back again from out the dale. And thus must he speak and no otherwise: O Earth, thou and thy first children, I crave of you such and such a thing, whatsoever it may be. And if he speak more than this, then is he undone. He shall answer no question of them; and if they threaten him he shall not pray them mercy, nor quail before their uplifted weapons; nor, to be short, shall he heed them more than if they still were stones unchanged. Moreover, when he hath said his say, then shall these wights throng about him and offer him gold and gems, and all the wealth of the earth; and if that be not enough, they shall bring him the goodliest of women, with nought lacking in her shape, but lacking all raiment, so that he shall see her as she is verily shapen. But whoso shall take any one of all these gifts is lost for ever, and shall become one of that Stony People; and whoso naysayeth them all until the cock crow, and abideth steady by his one craving, shall win fulfilment thereof, and, as some say, all those gifts aforesaid; for that the Stony People may not abide the day to take them back again.

He was silent therewith, and nought spake Birdalone, but looked down on the ground, and longing encompassed her soul. Then the priest spake again: This were a fair adventure, lady, for a hapless one, but for the happy it were a fool's errand. She answered not, and they parted for that time.

But the next week, there being yet no tidings come to hand, Birdalone prayed the castellan to take her

out-a-gates again, that she might once more behold the mountains, and the gates thereof; and he yea-said her asking, and went with her, well accompanied, as before; but this time, by Birdalone's will, they rode straight to the plain aforesaid, and again she looked into that dale of the Greywethers from the knoll. Somewhat belated they were, so that they might not get back to the castle before dusk, wherefore again they lay out in the wildwood, but there lacked somewhat of the triumph and joyance which they had had that other day. They came back to the castle on the morrow somewhat after noon, and found no news there; nor, to say sooth, did Birdalone look for any; and her heart was heavy.

CHAPTER VII. BIRDALONE BEGUILETH THE PRIEST TO HELP HER TO OUTGOING.

NOW had the time so worn that the season was in the first days of August, and weariness and heartsickness increased on Birdalone again, and she began to look pined and pale. Yet when she spake of the tarrying of the Champions both to the castellan and Sir Leonard the priest (who was the wiser man of the two), each said the same thing, to wit, that it was no marvel if they were not yet come, seeing what-like the adventure was; and neither of those two seemed in anywise to have lost hope.

Thrice in these last days did Birdalone go out-a-gates with Sir Aymeris and his company; and the last of the three times the journey was to the knoll that looked into the Black Valley; but now was Birdalone's pleasure of the sight of it afar off marred by her longing to be amidst thereof; yet she did not show that she was irked by the refraining of her desire to enter therein, and they turned, and came home safely to the castle.

On the morrow she sat with Sir Leonard the priest over the writing lesson, and she let it be long, and oft he touched her hand, so that the sweetness of unfulfilled desire went deep to his heart.

At last Birdalone looked up and said: Friend, I would ask thee if thou seest any peril in my entering the Black Valley of the Greywethers by daylight if I leave it by daylight? Alone? quoth he.

Yea, she said, alone. He pondered a little, and then said: Sooth to say I deem the peril little in the valley itself, if thou be not overcome by terror there. Yea, for my part I am not all so sure that thou shalt see the wonder of the Stony Folk coming alive; for 'tis not said that they quicken save on certain nights, and chiefly on Midsummer Night; unless it be that the trier of the adventure is some one fated above others thereto; as forsooth thou mayst be. And as for peril of evil men, there are few who be like to be as venturesome as thou or I. They durst not enter that black street, save sore need compel them. But forsooth, going thither, and coming back again, some peril there may be therein. And yet for weeks past there has been no word of any unpeace; and the Red Knight it is said for certain is not riding.

Birdalone was silent a while; then she said: Fair and kind friend, I am eating my heart out in longing for the coming back of my friends, and it is like, that unless I take to some remedy, I shall fall sick thereby, and then when they come back there shall be in me but sorry cheer for them. Now the remedy I know, and it is that I betake me alone to this adventure of the Black Valley; for meseemeth that I shall gain health and strength by my going thither. Wherefore, to be short, if thou wilt help me, I will go to-morrow. What sayest thou, wilt thou help me?

He turned very red and spake: Lady, why shouldest thou go, as thy name is, birdalone? Thou hast called me just now thy kind friend, so kind as

it was of thee; now therefore why should not thy friend go with thee?

Kindly indeed she smiled on him, but shook her head: I call thee trusty and dear friend again, said she; but what I would do I must do myself. Moreover to what end shouldst thou go? If I fall in with ghosts, a score of men would help me nought; and if I happen on weaponed men who would do me scathe, of what avail were one man against them? And look thou, Sir Leonard, there is this avail in thine abiding behind; if I come not back in two days' space, or three at the most, thou wilt wot that I have fared amiss, and then mayst thou let it be known whither I went, and men will seek me and deliver me maybe.

Therewith she stayed her words suddenly, and turned very pale, and laid her hand on her bosom, and said faintly: But O my heart, my heart! If they should come while I am away! And she seemed like to swoon.

Leonard was afraid thereat, and knew not what to do; but presently the colour came into her face again, and in a little while she smiled, and said: Seest thou not, friend, how weak I am gotten to be, and that I must now beyond doubt have the remedy? Wilt thou not help me do it?

Yea verily, said he; but in what wise wilt thou have it? He spake as a man distraught and redeless; but she smiled on him pleasantly, and said: Now by this time shouldst thou have devised what was to do, and spared me the pain thereof. Two things I need of thee: the first and most, to be put

out of the castle privily betimes in the morning when nought is stirring; the second, to have my palfrey awaiting me somewhat anigh the gate, so that I may not have to go afoot: for I am become soft and feeble with all this house-life.

Leonard seemed to wake up with that word, and said: I have the key of the priest's door of the chapel, and the postern beyond it; that shall be thine out-gate, lady. I will come and scratch at thy chamber-door much betimes, and I will see to it that thy palfrey is bestowed in the bower wherein thou didst rest the first night thou camest amongst us. She said: I trust thee, friend. And she thanked him sweetly, and then rose up and fell to pacing the hall up and down. Leonard hung about watching her a while, she nought forbidding him, for her thoughts were elsewhere, and she had forgotten him; and at last he went his ways to set about doing what she would.

CHAPTER VIII. BIRDALONE FARES ON HER ADVENTURE.

DAWN was but just beginning when Birdalone awoke, and though she had not heard Leonard at the door, she sprang out of bed and clad herself, doing on her black gown; and she had a scrip with some bread therein, and a sharp knife at her girdle. Then even as she had done she heard the priest's nail on the door, and she turned thereto; but as she went, her eye caught her bow and quiver of arrows where they hung on the wall, so she took the bow in her hand and slung the quiver over her shoulder ere she opened the door and found Leonard standing there. Neither of them spake aught, but they stole downstairs, and so to the chapel and out by the priest's door and the postern in the wall-nook, and were presently out in the fresh morning air; and Birdalone was joyous and lightfoot, and scarce felt the earth beneath her soles for pleasure of her hope, whereas she deemed she had a thing to crave of the Stony Folk, if they should come alive before her. Fain were she, if she might withal, to give a joy to some other; so that when they were gone but a little way from the castle she reached out her hand to Leonard and took his, and said: Hand in hand we walked when first I went this way, and I deemed thee kind and friendly then, and even so hast thou been sithence.

He was dumbfoundered at first for joy of the touch of her hand and the sweetness of her words;

but presently he spake to her confused and stammering, and praised her that she had thought to take her bow and arrows; for, said he, that they might stand her in stead for defence or for getting of food, or for an excuse for wending the woods. She nodded yeasay unto him, and bade him again to bide three days for her, and if she came not again in that time, to make a clean breast of it to Sir Aymeris.

Yea, said the priest, and then . . . Why, what then? He can but shove me out by the shoulders, and then I can seek to the little house of canons that is at Gate Cross on the road to Greenford.

Ah, my friend! said Birdalone, how we women think of nothing at all but ourselves! And wilt thou be thrust out of thine home for helping me herein? Why did I not look to my palfrey myself? And the keys I might have stolen from thee, always with thy good will. But now I see that I have done thee a hurt.

Said Sir Leonard: Lady, a priest hath a home wheresoever is an house of religion. There is no harm done, save Sir Aymeris bethink him of hanging me over the battlements; as I doubt he will not with a priest. Moreover, I pray thee believe, that wert thou gone from the castle, house and home were none for me there. And he looked upon her piteously, as if he were beseeching.

But she knew not what to say, and hung her head adown; and presently they were come to the bower in the copse, which this time was a stable for Birdalone's palfrey instead of a chamber for

herself. So Leonard went in and fetched out the comely beast; and Birdalone stood with him just in the cover of the copse waiting to put her foot in the stirrup; but she might not but abide to look upon the priest, who stood there as if he were striving with his words.

So she said: Now is need of haste to be gone. Yet one word, my friend: Is there aught betwixt us wherein I have done thee wrong? If so it be, I pray thee to say out what it is; for it may be (though I think it not) thou shalt not see me again from henceforth.

He caught his breath, as if he had much ado to refrain the sobbing; but he mastered it, and said: Lady and dear friend, if I see thee not again, I heed not what shall befall me. Thou hast done me no wrong. There is this only betwixt us, that I love thee, and thou lovest not me.

She looked on him sweetly and pitifully, and said: I may not choose but understand thy word, to wit, that thy love for me is the desire of a man toward a woman; and that is unhappy; for I love thee indeed, but not as a woman loveth a man. It is best to say thus much to thee downright. But I feel in my heart that when I have said it, it is as much as to say that I cannot help thee, and therefore am I sorry indeed.

He stood before her abashed, but he said at last: Now art thou so sweet, and so kind, and so true, that I must perforce love thee yet more; and this maketh me bold to say that thou mayst help me a little, or so meseemeth. How so? said Bird-

alone. Quoth he: If thou wouldst suffer me to kiss thy face this once. She shook her head, and spake: How may it avail thee, when it is for once, and once only, as forsooth it must be? Yet it is thy choice, not mine, and I will not naysay thee.

And therewith she put up her face to him, and he kissed her cheek without touching her otherwise, and then he kissed her mouth; and she knew that he was both timorous and sad, and she was ashamed to look on him, or to speak to him any more, lest she should behold him ashamed; so she but said: Farewell, friend, till to-morrow at least.

And therewith her foot was in the stirrup, and anon she sat in the saddle, and her palfrey was ambling briskly on the way she would.

CHAPTER IX. BIRDALONE COMES TO THE BLACK VALLEY.

LITTLE is to tell of Birdalone's journey unto the knoll above the Black Valley of the Greywethers. It was about noon when she came there, and had met but few folk on the way, and those few were husbandmen, or carlines, or maidens wending afield betimes not far from the Castle of the Quest.

Now she sat on her horse and looked down into the dale and its stony people once more, and saw nought stirring save three ravens who, not far off, were flapping about from stone to stone of the Greywethers, and croaking loud to each other as if some tidings were toward. She watched their play for a little, and then gat off her horse, and sat down on the grass of the knoll, and drew forth her victual, and ate and drank; for she deemed it happier to eat and drink there than in the very jaws of the Black Valley.

Soon was her dinner done, and then she got to her saddle again, and rode slowly down to the little stream, and along it toward the valley and the gates of the mountains, which she had been fain to pass through; but now, as had happed with her that morning when she was boun for the Sending Boat, somewhat she hung back from the adventure, and when she lacked but some five score yards from the very dale itself, she lighted down again, and let her way-beast bite the grass, while she sat down and watched the rippling water.

In a while she drew off shoon and hosen, and stood in the shallow ripple, and bathed her hands and face withal, and stooped up-stream and drank from the hollow of her hands, and so stepped ashore and was waxen hardier; then she strung her bow and looked to the shafts in her quiver, and did on her foot-gear, and mounted once more, and so rode a brisk amble right on into the dale, and was soon come amongst the Greywethers; and she saw that they were a many, and that all the bottom of the dale was besprinkled with them on either side of the stream, and some stood in the very stream itself, the ground whereof was black even as the rest of the valley, although the water ran over it as clear as glass.

As for the dale, now she was fairly within it, she could see but a little way up it, for it winded much, and at first away from her left hand, and the sides of it went up in somewhat steep screes on either side, which were topped with mere upright staves and burgs of black rock; and these were specially big and outthrusting on the right hand of her; and but a furlong ahead of where she was, one of these burgs thrust out past the scree and came down sheer into the dale, and straitened it so much that there was but little way save by the stream itself, which ran swift indeed, but not deep, even there where it was straitened by the sheer rocks.

But up the dale would she go, whatever was before her; and now she told herself her very purpose, as forsooth she scarce had heretofore; to wit, that she would abide in the dale the night over

and see what should betide, and if those wights should chance to come alive, then she looked to have valiance enough to face them and crave the fulfilment of her desire.

So she took the water and rode the stream till she was past the said sheer rock, and then the valley widened again, and presently was wider than it was in the beginning; and here again were the Greywethers grown many more and closer together, and, as she deemed, were set in rings round about one very big one, which, forsooth, was somewhat in the shape of a man sitting down with his hands laid on his knees.

Birdalone reined up for a minute, and looked about her, and then went up on to the grass, and rode straight to the said big stone, and there lighted down from off her horse again, and stood by the stone and pondered. Presently she deemed that she saw something dark moving just beyond the stone, but if it were so, it was gone in a twinkling; nevertheless she stood affrighted, and stared before her long, and saw no more, but yet for a while durst not move hand nor foot.

At last her courage came again, and she thought: Yet how if this great chieftain be inwardly stirring and will come awake? Shall I say the word now, lest hereafter it be of no avail? Therewith she stretched out her right hand and laid it on the stone, and spake aloud: O Earth, thou and thy first children, I crave of you that he may come back now at once and loving me. And her voice sounded strange and unkent to her in that solitude, and she rued it that she had spoken.

CHAPTER X. HOW BIRDALONE FELL IN WITH A MAN IN THE BLACK VALLEY OF THE GREYWETHERS.

CAME new tidings therewithal; for the moment after she had spoken, a tall man drew out from behind the big stone, and stood before her; and at first it was in her mind that this was the very chieftain come alive for her, and for terror she was like to swoon this time; but he spake nought a while, but looked on her eagerly and curiously.

She came to herself presently, so much that she could see him clearly, and was now growing more shamefast than afraid, when she saw beyond doubt that the man was of the sons of Adam; but what with her shame that was now, and her fear that had been, she yet had no might to move, but stood there pale and trembling like a leaf, and might scarce keep her feet.

Now the new-comer bowed before her smiling, and said: I ask thy pardon, fair damsel (or indeed I should say fairest damsel), that I have scared thee. But sooth to say I beheld thee coming riding, and even from a little aloof I could see that nought which might befall could ever make it up to me for not seeing thee close at hand and hearing thee speak. Wherefore I hid myself behind the king's stone here; and no harm is done thereby I trow; for now I see that the colour is coming into thy cheeks again, and thy fear is gone. And as for me, thou hast not fled away from

me, as thou wouldst have done had I not hidden and come on thee suddenly; and then thou being horsed and I unhorsed, thou wouldst have escaped me, whereas now thou art within reach of my hand. Then he smiled, and said: Furthermore, thou hast told so little of thy secret to this stony king here, that I am little the wiser for thy word, and thou the little more betrayed. Only this I will say, that if He loveth thee not, He is more of a fool than I be.

He reached out his hand to hers, but she drew it aback, and grew yet more ashamed, and could find no word for him. His voice was soft and full, and he spake deftly, but she was not content with it for its kindness, as she had been with all the other men whom she had met since she left the House under the Wood, and she durst not trust her hand to him.

As for his aspect, she saw that he was tall and well-knit, and goodly of fashion; dark-haired, with long hazel eyes, smooth-cheeked and bright-skinned; his nose long, and a little bent over at the end, and coming down close to his lips, which were full and red; his face was hairless save for a little lip-beard. He was so clad, that he had no helm on his head, but a little hat with a broad gold piece in the front thereof; he was girt to a long sword, and had an anlace also in his belt, and Birdalone saw the rings of a fine hauberk at his collar and knees; otherwise he was not armed. Over his hauberk he wore a black surcoat, without device of any kind, and his foot and leg gear were of the

same hue; wherefore may we call him the Black Knight. Sooth to say, for all his soft speech, she feared him and rued the meeting of him.

Now he spake to her again: I see that thou art wroth with me, lady; but mayhappen it is not so ill that I have happened on thee; for this dale hath a bad name for more than one thing, and is scarce meet for damsels to wander in. But now since thou hast a weaponed man with thee, and thou, by All-hallows! not utterly unarmed, thou mayst well go up the valley and see something more thereof. So come now, mount thine horse again, and I will lead him for thee.

Now Birdalone found speech and said: Knight, for such thou seemest to me, I deem now that I have no need to fare further in this dale, but I will get me into the saddle and turn my horse's head outward again, giving thee good day first and thanking thee for thy courtesy. And therewith she turned to get to her palfrey, but sore trembling the while; but he followed her and said, with brow somewhat knitted: Nay, lady, I have left my horse somewhat further up, and I must go back to fetch him, that we may wend out of the dale together. For I will not suffer thee to flee from me and fall into the hands of evil wights, be they ghosts or living men, and that the less since I have heard the speech in thy mouth, as of honey and cream and roses. Therefore if thou go out of the dale, I shall go with thee afoot, leading thine horse. And look to it if it be courteous to unhorse a knight, who is ready to be thy servant. Moreover, since thou hast come

to this dale of wonder, and mayst leave it safely, pity it were that thou shouldst see nought thereof, for strange is it forsooth, and belike thou shalt never seek thither again. Wherefore I crave of thee, once more, to mount thine horse and let me lead thee up the dale.

He spake these last words rather as one giving a command than making a prayer, and Birdalone feared him now sorely. Forsooth she had her bended bow in hand; but let alone that the knight was over-near to her that she might get a shaft out of her quiver and nock it, ere he should run in on her, and let alone also that he was byrnied, she scarce deemed that it behoved her to slay or wound the man because she would be quit of him. Wherefore angrily, and with a flushed face, she answered him: So shall it be then, Sir Knight; or rather so must it be, since thou compellest me.

He laughed and said: Nay, now thou art angry. I compel thee not, I but say that it will not do for thee to compel me to leave thee. Go which way thou wilt, up the dale, or down it and out of it; it is all one unto me, so long as I am with thee. Forsooth, damsel, I have said harder words to ladies who have done my pleasure and not deemed themselves compelled.

She paled but answered nought; then she mounted her palfrey, and the knight went to her bridle-rein without more words, and so led her on up the valley by the easiest way amongst the Greywethers.

CHAPTER XI. BIRDALONE IS LED UP THE BLACK VALLEY.

AS they went, the knight fell a-talking to Birdalone, and that without any of the covert jeering which he had used erewhile; and he showed her places in the dale, as caverns under the burgs, and little eyots in the stream, and certain stones amongst the Greywethers whereof stories ran; and how this and the other one had fared in dealings with the land-wights, and how one had perished, and another had been made happy, and so forth. Withal he told of the mountain-folk, and in especial how they of the plains, when he was scarce more than a boy, had met them in battle in that same dale, and how fierce the fight was; whereas the mountain-men were fighting for a life of desires accomplished, which hitherto had been but a dream unto them; and the men of the plain fought for dear life itself, and for all that made it aught save death in life. Wherefore up and down the dale they fought, at first in ordered ranks and then in knots, and lastly sword to sword and man to man, till there was no foot of grass or black sand there which had not its shower of blood; and the stream was choked with the dead, and ran red out of the dale; till at last well-nigh all the host of the mountain-men was fallen, and scarce less of the folk of the plains, but these men held the field and had the victory.

All this he told her deftly and well, and though he said not so right out, yet let her wot that,

youth as he was, he was of the battle; and his voice was clear and good, and Birdalone's wrath ran off her, and she hearkened his tale, and even asked him a question here and there; and so courteous was this Black Knight now become, that Birdalone began to think that she had fallen short of courtesy to him, because of her fear and the weariness of the waiting which so oppressed her; and that shamed and irked her, for she would fain be of all courtesy. Wherefore now she deemed that perchance she had erred in deeming him an evil man; and she looked on him from time to time, and deemed him goodly of fashion; she thought his eyes were deep, and his face sober and fair of aspect, but that his nose turned down at the end, and was over thin at the bridge, and moreover his lips looked over-sweet and licorous.

Now when the knight was silent of his tales, Birdalone fell to asking him questions sweetly concerning this Stony People which was all about them; and he told her all he knew, soberly enough at first, yet indeed ended by mocking them somewhat, but mocked not at her any more. At last he said: Fair lady, that thou hast not come here all for nought I partly know by those words which I heard come from thy mouth at the King's Stone; wherefore I marvelled indeed when I heard thee say that thou wouldst go straight out of the dale; for I had deemed thee desirous of trying the adventure of waking this Stony People a-night-tide. Forsooth was this thy mind when thou soughtest hither to the dale?

She reddened at his word, and yeasaid him shortly. Then said he: Is it not thy mind still? Sir, said she, as now I have got to fear it. Yea? and that is strange, said he, for thou wouldst have waked the dale alone; and now thou art no longer alone, but hast me to watch and ward thy waking, thou art more afeard.

She looked on his face steadily, to wot if there were no half-hidden smile therein; but herseemed that he spake in all soberness; and she had nought to say to him save this: Sir, I am now become afraid of the waking. And he said no more thereof.

Now they went thus, and Birdalone not without pleasure, since her fear of the knight was minished, some three hours up the dale, and still were the Greywethers everywhere about them, so that there were well-nigh as many hours as miles in their wending.

At last they seemed to be drawing nigh to the head of the dale, and the burgs and the rocks were before them all round it as a wall, though yet about a mile aloof at the further end; and this end it was wider than elsewhere.

Came they then to a level space of greensward clear of the grey stones, which were drawn all around it in ordered rings, so that it was as some doom-ring of an ancient people; and within the said space Birdalone beheld a great black horse tethered and cropping the grass. The knight led her into the ring, and said: Now are we come home for the present, my lady, and if it please thee to light down

we shall presently eat and drink, and sithence talk a little. And he drew nigh to help her off her horse, but she suffered him not, and lighted down of herself; but if she suffered not his hand, his eyes she must needs suffer, as he gazed greedily on the trimness of her feet and legs in her sliding from her horse.

Howsoever, he took her hand, and led her to a little mound on the other side of the ring, and bade her sit down there, and so did she, and from under the nighest of the stones he drew forth a pair of saddle-bags, and took victual and wine thence, and they ate and drank together like old companions. And now Birdalone told herself that the knight was frank and friendly; yet forsooth she wotted that her heart scarce trowed what it feigned, and that she yet feared him.

CHAPTER XII. HOW THOSE TWAIN GET THEM FROM OUT OF THE BLACK VALLEY OF THE GREY-WETHERS.

WHEN they had dined, and had sat a while talking, the knight said: I will ask thee once more wherefore thou must needs depart from this dale leaving the Greywethers unwaked? Yet this must I tell thee first, that this ring at the dale's end is the only one due place where the Greywethers can be rightly waked, and that there be few who wot this. Wilt thou not tell me then what is in thy mind?

Birdalone gazed down on the ground a while; then she lifted up her head and looked on the Black Knight, and said: Sir Knight, we have been brought so close together to-day, and as meseemeth I am so wholly in thy power, that I will tell thee the very truth as it is. My mind it was to wake the dale here to-night, and take what might befall me. And well indeed might I fear the adventure, which few, meseemeth, would not fear. But so strong is my longing for that which I would crave of these wights, that it overmastered my fear, and my purpose held when I entered the dale. Then I met thee; and here again is the truth, take it how thou wilt, that presently I feared thee, and yet I fear thee; for I have noted thee closely all this while, and have seen of thee, that thou art over heedful of my poor body, and wouldst have it for thine own if thou mightest. And there is this in thee also, as I deem, though

thou thyself mayst not know it, that thou wouldst have thy pleasure of me whether it pleasure me or grieve me; and this thy pleasure must I needs gainsay; for though thou mayest hereafter become my friend, yet are there other friends of mine, who be such, that my grief would mar any pleasure they might have. Hast thou heard and understood?

She looked on his face steadily as she spake, and saw that it flushed, and darkened, and scowled, and that his hands were clenched, and his teeth set hard together. And again she spake: Sir, thou shalt know that beside these shot-weapons, I have a thing here in my girdle that may serve either against thee or against me, if need drive me thereto; wherefore I will pray thee to forbear. Forsooth, thou shalt presently happen on other women, who shall be better unto thee than I can be.

By then Birdalone had spoken the word, the knight's face had cleared, and he laughed aloud and said: As to thy last words, therein at least thou liest, my lady. But for the rest, I see that it must all be as thou willest. Yea, if such be thy will, we shall presently to horse and ride down the dale again, and at the end thereof I shall leave thee to go home alone at thy will. She said: For that I can thee thanks with all my heart. But why hast thou not asked me of whence I am, and whither I would go home?

Again he laughed and said: Because I know already. I have had more than two or three tales from them who have seen thee, or spoken unto others who have seen thee, how the gay Champions

of the Castle of the Quest had fished up a wondrous pearl of price from out of the Great Water; and when I set eyes on thy beauty, I knew that the said pearl could be nowhere else than under mine eyes.

Let that pass, she said, and blushed not; but now tell me the truth as I have told thee, why thou art so instant with me to wake the Greywethers to-night? He kept silence a while, and, as she looked on him, she thought she saw confusion in his face; but at last he said: Thou wert wrong in saying that I heeded not thy pleasure, and solace, and welfare. Meseemed, and yet doth, that it might be to thine avail to wake the Greywethers to-night; and never again mayst thou have a chance of the waking, as erst I said. I say I wish thee to have fulfilment of thy craving. Nor hast thou aught to fear of them, seeing that it is but dastards and fools that they undo.

He broke off his speech, and Birdalone yet looked on him, and after a little he said: Thou drawest the truth out of me; for moreover I would have thee with me longer than thou wouldst be if we but rode together down the water and out of the dale, and thou to fare away alone.

Birdalone spake in a while, and that while he gazed upon her eagerly; she said: I shall now tell thee that I shall abide the adventure of the waking to-night, whatever befall. And I, said he, will so do that thou mayst fear me the less; for I will unarm me when the night cometh, and thou thyself shalt keep mine hauberk and sword and anlace.

She said: It is well; I will take that, lest desire overmaster thee.

They spake no more of it at that time, and it was now five hours after noon. Birdalone arose, for she found it hard to sit still and abide nightfall: she went without the two first rings of the Greywethers, which were set in more open order beyond that, and she looked all about her, to the black rocks on either side, and to the great black wall at the dale's ending, and the blue mountains aloof beyond it; then down toward the plain of the dale came her eyes, and she looked through the tangle of the grey stones. Now she seemed to be looking more intently upon some one thing; with that she called to her the Black Knight, who was hanging about watching her, and she said to him: Fair sir, art thou clear-seeing and far-seeing? I am not thought to be purblind, quoth he. Then Birdalone reached out her hand and pointed and said: Canst thou see aught which thou didst not look to see, there, up the dale as I point? Said he: All too clear I see the hand and the wrist of thee, and that blinds me to aught else. I pray thee fool not, she said, but look heedfully, and thou mayst see what I see, and then tell me what it means. Though forsooth I am exceeding in far sight.

He looked under the sharp of his hand heedfully, then he turned unto her and said: By Allhallows! there is in thee every excellency! Thou art right; I see a bay horse up there feeding on the bites of grass amongst the Greywethers. Look again! she said; what else canst thou see? Is there

aught anigh to the bay horse which is like to the gleam and glitter of metal. Christ! said he, once more thou art right. There be weaponed men in the dale. Tarry not, I beseech thee, but get to horse forthright, and I will do no less.

There goeth the waking of the dale for this time, said Birdalone, laughing. But art thou not in haste, fair sir? may not these be friends?

The knight laid his hand upon her shoulder, and thrust her on toward her palfrey, and spake fiercely, but not loud: Thee I pray not to fool now! There is not a minute to spare. If thou deemest me evil, as I think thou dost, there are worser than I, I tell thee, there are worser. But we will talk of it when we be in the saddle, and clear of this accursed dale.

Birdalone knew not what to do save obey him, so she lightly gat into her saddle, and followed him, for he was mounted in a twinkling, and riding on. He led out of the ring, and fell to threading the maze of the Greywethers, keeping ever toward the steep side of the dale, which was on that hand that looked toward the Castle of the Quest, that is to say, the eastern bent. Birdalone wondered at this leading, and when she was come up with the knight she spake to him breathlessly, and said: But, fair sir, why wend we not down the dale? He answered: First, lady, because we must hide us from them straightway; and next because they be more than we, many more, and their horses be fresh, while thine at least is somewhat spent; and if they were to spur down the dale in chase, they would soon

be upon us; for think not that I would escape and leave thee behind.

Said Birdalone: But thou knowest them, then, what they be? since thou wottest of their numbers and their riding. Hearken now! Upon thy soul and thy salvation, be they more friends unto thee than unto me?

He said, as he rode on a little slower than erst: Upon my soul and my salvation I swear it, that the men yonder be of the worst unfriends to thee that may be in the world. And now, lady, I promise thee that I will unravel thee the riddle, and tell thee the whole truth of these haps, whatsoever may come of my words, when we be in a safer place than this; and meantime I beseech thee to trust in me thus far, as to believe that I am leading thee out of the very worst peril that might befall thee. Nay, thou must needs trust me; for I tell thee, that though I now love thee better than all the world and all that is in it, I would slay thee here in this dale rather than suffer thee to fall into the hands of these men.

Birdalone heard him with a sick heart; but such passion went with his words that she believed what he said; and she spake softly: Sir, I will trust thee thus far; but I beseech thee to have pity upon a poor maiden who hath had but little pity shown unto her until these latter days; and then: O woe's me, to have fallen out of the kindness and love once more!

The Black Knight spake to her in a little while, and said: What pity I can to thee, that I will.

Once more I tell thee, that if thou but knew it thou wouldst thank me indeed for what I have done for thee in this hour; and henceforth I will do and forbear with thee to the uttermost that love will suffer me. But lo thou! here are we safe for this present; but we must nowise tarry.

Birdalone looked and saw that they were come to the wall of the dale, and that there it went down sheer to the plain thereof, and that before them was a cleft that narrowed speedily, and over which the rocks well-nigh met, so that it was indeed almost a cave. They rode into it straightway, and when that they had gone but a little, and because it had winded somewhat, they could but see the main valley as a star of light behind them, then it narrowed no more, but was as a dismal street of the straitest, whiles lighter and whiles darker, according as the rocks roofed it in overhead or drew away from it. Long they rode, and whiles came trickles of water from out the rocks on one hand or the other; and now and again they met a stream which covered all the ground of the pass from side to side for the depth of a foot or more. Great rocks also were strewn over their path every here and there, so that whiles must they needs dismount and toil afoot over the rugged stones; and in most places the way was toilsome and difficult. The knight spake little to Birdalone, save to tell her of the way, and warn her where it was perilous; and she, for her part, was silent, partly for fear of the strange man, or, it might be, even for hatred of him, who had thus brought her into such sore trouble,

and partly for grief. For, with all torment of sorrow, she kept turning over and over in her mind whether her friends had yet come home to the Castle of the Quest, and whether they would go seek her to deliver her. And such shame took hold of her when she thought of their grief and confusion of soul when they should come home and find her gone, that she set her mind to asking if it had not been better had she never met them. Yet in good sooth her mind would not shape the thought, howsoever she bade it.

CHAPTER XIII. NOW THEY REST FOR THE NIGHT IN THE STRAIT PASS.

AT last, when they had been going a long while, it might be some six hours, and it had long been night in the world without, but moon-lit, and they had rested but seldom, and then but for short whiles, the knight drew rein and spake to Birdalone, and asked her was she not weary. O yea, she said; I was at point to pray thee suffer me to get off and lie down on the bare rock. To say sooth, I am now too weary to think of any peril, or what thou art, or whither we be going. He said: By my deeming we be now half through this mountain highway, and belike there is little peril in our resting; for I think not that any one of them knoweth of this pass, or would dare it if he did; and they doubtless came into the dale by the upper pass, which is strait enough, but light and open.

As he spoke, Birdalone bowed forward on her horse's neck, and would have fallen but that he stayed her. Then he lifted her off her horse, and laid her down in the seemliest place he might find; and the pass there was much widened, and such light as there was in the outer world came down freely into it, though it were but of the moon and the stars; and the ground was rather sandy than rocky. So he dight Birdalone's bed as well as he might, and did off his surcoat and laid it over her; and then stood aloof, and gazed on her; and he muttered: It is an evil chance; yet the pleasure of it, the pleas-

ure of it! Yea, said he again, she might well be wearied; I myself am ready to drop, and I am not the least tough of the band. And therewith he laid him down on the further side of the pass, and fell asleep straightway.

CHAPTER XIV. THE BLACK KNIGHT TELLS THE TRUTH OF HIMSELF.

WHEN the morning was come down into the straitness of their secret road, Birdalone opened her eyes and saw the Black Knight busy over dighting their horses: so she arose and thrust her grief back into her heart, and gave her fellow-farer the sele of the day, and he brought her victual, and they ate a morsel, and gat to horse thereafter and departed; and the way became smoother, and it was lighter overhead everywhere now, and the rocks never again met overhead athwart the way; and it seemed to Birdalone that now they were wending somewhat downward.

The knight was courteous unto Birdalone, and no longer for the present thrust his love upon her, so that now she had some solace of his fellowship, though he was but few-spoken to her.

It was betimes when they arose, and they rode all the morning till it was noon, which they might well wot of, because the way was much wider, and the cliff-walls of the pass much lower, so that the sun shone in upon them and cheered them.

Now the Black Knight drew rein and said: Shall we rest, lady, and eat? And thereafter, if thou wilt, I shall tell thee my tale. Or rather, if thou wilt suffer me, I shall speak first and eat afterwards, or else the morsel might stick in my throat. Knight, said Birdalone, smiling, I hope thou hast no lie to swallow down before the meat. Nay, lady, said he; no lie that is of moment at least.

So they lighted down, and Birdalone sat on the wayside under a birch-bush that came thrusting out from the rock, and the knight stood before her, hanging his head, as though he were one accused who would plead his cause; and he began:

Lady, I must tell thee first of all, that to-day I have done as an unfaithful servant and a traitor to my lord. Said Birdalone simply: Shall I tell thee the truth, and say that from the first I seemed to see in thee that thou wert scarce trusty? He said: Well, that mind I saw in thee, and it went to my heart that thou shouldest think it, and that it should be no less than true. But now I must tell thee, that it is for thy sake that I have been untrusty to my lord. How so? said she. Quoth he: Heardest thou ever of the Red Knight? Yea, said Birdalone, I have heard of him ever as a tyrant and oppressor. Then she grew pale, and said: Art thou he? Nay, said the knight, I am but a kinsman of his, and his best-trusted man; nor have I failed him ever till yesterday.

He kept silence a while, and then said: This is the true tale: that we have had tidings of thee and of thy ridings abroad with that old fool, Sir Aymeris, and how thou hadst been twice to look into the Black Valley. This I say hath the Red One heard, and the heart of him was touched by the mere hearsay of thee; and moreover 'tis blessed bread to him the doing of any grief to the knights of Quest Castle; wherefore he hath sent me to hang about the dale, to lay hands on thee if I might; for he knew, being wise, that thou wouldst hanker after it; and more-

over he let one of his wise women sit out in spells on thee. So I espied, and happened on thee all alone; and mine errand it was, since I came upon thee thus, to draw thee till I had thee safe at home in the Red Hold. Forsooth I began mine errand duly, and fell to beguiling thee, so that thou mayst well have seen the traitor in me. But then, and then my heart failed me, because I fell, not to desiring thee as coveting my master's chattel, but to loving thee and longing for thee as my fellow and speech-friend. And I said to myself: Into the Red Hold she shall not go if I may hinder it.

Birdalone was very pale, but she refrained her from grief and fear, and said: But those horsed and weaponed men up the dale, who were they? He said: I will not lie now, not even a little; they came into the dale by that upper pass whereof I told thee; they were of our men; I brought them. I was never all alone in the dale; I was to have fetched thee to them, so that thou mightest not see a rout of folk and flee away; and then would we all have gone home together by the upper pass. But we two must have gone on unto them in the dale's head, whereas for all that I could say I might not bring them down into that doom-ring where we ate and talked yesterday. We two have been valianter than thou mayst have deemed, to have done the deed of dining there; for all men fear it. But as for me, I have been there more than twice or thrice, and thence have I wandered, and found this pass wherein now we be; concerning which I have held my tongue, deeming that it might one day serve

my turn; as it hath done now abundantly, since it hath been a refuge unto thee.

Yea, but whither are we going now? said Birdalone; is it perchance to the Red Hold? Nay, never, said the knight, so help me God and All-hallows!

Whither then? said Birdalone; tell me, that I may at least trust thee, even though I owe thee for all the pain and grief which thou hast wrought me. He reddened and said: Wait a while; I bring thee to no ill place; there shall no harm befall thee. And he fretted and fumed, and was confused of speech and look, and then he said: When we come there I shall belike crave a boon of thee.

O, but I crave a boon of thee here and now, said Birdalone. Wipe away thine offence to me and take me back to my friends and the Castle of the Quest! So mayst thou yet be dear unto me, though maybe not wholly as thou wouldst have it. And she reached out her two hands toward him.

His breast heaved, and he seemed nigh to weeping; but he said: Nay, lady, ask me not here and now, but there and to-morrow. But again I swear to thee by thine hands that to the Red Hold I will not bring thee, nor suffer thee to be brought, if I may hinder it; nay, not though I give my life therefor.

Birdalone was silent a while; then she said: And what shall befall me if I come to the Red Hold? What is the Red Knight, and what would he do with me? Said he: The Red Knight is terrible and fierce and wise; and I fear him, I. He held

his peace, and said: I must needs say it, that to thee he would have been as Death and the Devil. He would have bedded thee first. She broke in: Nay, never! and flushed very red. But the knight went on: And after, I wot not; that were according to his mood. And as to thy never, lady, thou wottest not the like of him or of the folk he hath about him. Such as thou? she said angrily. Nay, he said, far worse than me; men who fare little afield, and are not sweetened by adventures and war-perils; and women worser yet; and far worser were they dealing with a woman. She was silent again awhile, and paled once more; then her colour came back to her, and she held out her hand to him and said kindly: Thou being what thou art, I thank thee for thy dealings with me; and now until to-morrow, when I shall ask thee of that again, I am friends with thee; so come now, and let us eat and drink together.

He took her hand and kissed it, and then came and sat down meekly beside her, and they ate and drank in that wild place as though they had been friends of long acquaintance.

CHAPTER XV. THE BLACK KNIGHT BRINGS BIRDALONE TO THE BOWER IN THE DALE.

WHEN they had made an end of their meal, they gat to horse again and rode on their ways; and every mile now was their road the easier, the pass wider, and its walls lower and now also more broken; till at last they began to go down hill swiftly, and after a little their road seemed to be swallowed in a great thicket of hornbeam and holly; but the knight rode on and entered the said thicket, and ever found some way amidst the branches, though they were presently in the very thick of the trees, and saw no daylight between the trunks for well-nigh an hour, whereas the wood was thick and tangled, and they had to thread their way betwixt its mazes.

At last the wood began to grow thinner before them, and the white light to show between the trunks; and Birdalone deemed that she heard the sound of falling water, and presently was sure thereof; and the knight spake to her: Patience, my lady; now are we near home for to-day. She nodded kindly to him, and therewith they rode on to open ground, and were on the side of a steep bent, broken on their right hands into a sheer cliff, as Birdalone saw when the knight led her to the edge and bade her look over. Then she saw down into a fair dale lying far below them, through the which ran a little river, clear and swift, but not riotous, after it had fallen over a force at the upper end of

the dale, and made the sound of water which she had heard. The said dale was so, that whatsoever was on the other side thereof was hidden by tall and great trees, that stood close together some twenty yards aloof from the stream, and betwixt them and it was fair greensward with a few bushes and thorn-trees thereon.

Quoth the knight: Down there shall we rest till to-morrow, if it please thee, lady; and since the sun will set in an hour, we were best on our way at once. It pleases me well, said Birdalone, and I long to tread the turf by the river-side, for I am weary as weary may be of the saddle and the pass.

So down the bent they rode, and it was but a little ere they had ridden it to an end, and had met the river as it swept round the cliff-wall of the valley; and they rode through it, and came on to the pleasant greensward aforesaid under the trees; and in a bight of the wood was a bower builded of turf and thatched with reed; and there, by the bidding of the knight, they alighted; and the knight said: This is thine house for to-night, my lady; and thou mayest lie there in all safety after thou hast supped, and mayst have my weapons by thy side if thou wilt, while I lie under the trees yonder. And if thou wilt bathe thee in the cool water, to comfort thee after the long ride and the weariness, I swear by thy hand that I will take myself out of eye-shot and abide aloof till thou call me.

Said Birdalone, smiling somewhat: Fair sir, I will not have my watch and ward unarmed; keep thou thy weapons; and thou wilt not forget, per-

chance, that I am not wholly unarmed, whereas I have my bow and arrows and my knife here. And as to my bathing, I will take thee at thy word, and bid thee go aloof a while now at once; for I will go down to the water; and if thou spy upon me, then will it be thy shame and not mine.

The knight went his ways therewith, and Birdalone went down to the water and unclad her; but ere she stepped into the river, she laid her bow and three shafts on the lip thereof. Then she took the water, and disported her merrily therein; and now, forsooth, she was nowise downcast, for she said to herself, this man is not all evil and he loveth me well, and I look for it that to-morrow he will bring me on my way toward the Castle of the Quest, for mere love of me; and then shall he be a dear friend to me, and I will comfort him what I can for as long as we both live.

So she came out of the water and clad her, and then called aloud for the knight, and he came speedily unto her, as if he had been not exceeding far away, though he swore with a great oath that he had nowise espied her. She answered him nought, and they went side by side to the bower; and there the knight dight the victual, and they sat together and ate their meat like old friends; and Birdalone asked the knight concerning this valley and the bower, if he had known it for long, and he answered: Yea, lady, I was but a stripling when I first happened on the dale; and I deem that few know thereof save me; at least none of our flock knoweth thereof; and I am fain thereof, and keep

them unknowing, for if my lord were to hear of my having a haunt privy unto me he would like it but ill.

Birdalone turned pale when she heard him speak of his lord; for fear of the Red Knight had entered into her soul, so that now the flesh crept upon her bones. But she enforced her to smile, and said: Yea, and what would he do to thee were he ill-content with thy ways? Forsooth, lady, said he, if he could spare me he would make an end of me in some miserable way; nay, if he were exceeding ill-content, he would do as much for me whether he could spare me or not; otherwise he would watch his occasion, and so grieve me that what he did would go to my very heart. Woe's me! said Birdalone, thou servest an evil master. The knight answered not, and Birdalone went on speaking earnestly: It is a shame to thee to follow this fiend; why dost thou not sunder thee from him, and become wholly an honest man? Said he gruffly: It is of no use talking of this, I may not; to boot, I fear him. Then did Birdalone hold her peace, and the knight said: Thou dost not know; when I part from thee I must needs go straight to him, and then must that befall which will befall. Speak we no more of these matters.

Birdalone flushed with hope and joy as he spake thus, for she took him to mean that he would lead her, on the morrow, on her way to the Castle of the Quest. But the knight spake in a voice grown cheerful again: As to this bower, lady, the tale thereof is soon told; for with mine own hands I

builded it some fifteen years ago; and I have come to this place time and again when my heart was overmuch oppressed with black burdens of evil and turmoil, and have whiles prevailed against the evil, and whiles not. Mayst thou prevail this time, then! said she. He answered her not, but presently fell to talking with her of other matters, and the two were frank and friendly together, till the August night grew dark about them; and then spake Birdalone: Now would I rest, for I can no longer keep mine eyes open. Abide aloof from me to-morrow morning till I call to thee, as thou didst this evening; and then, before we eat together again, thou shalt tell me what thou wilt do with me. He stood up to depart, and she reached out her hand to him in the glimmer, and he saw it, but said: Nay, if I take thine hand, I shall take thine whole body. And therewith he departed, and she laid her down in her smock alone, and slept anon, and was dreamless and forgetting everything till the sun was up in the morning.

CHAPTER XVI. YET A DAY AND A NIGHT THEY TARRY IN THE DALE.

BIRDALONE awoke when the sun came into the bower to her, and stood up at once, and went down to the river and washed the night off her; and then, when she was clad, called on the knight to come to her; and he came, looking downcast and troubled; so that Birdalone thought within herself: It is well, he will do my will.

She stood before him, and gave him the sele of the day, and he looked on her sorrowfully. Then she said: Now is come the time when I am to ask thee to take me back to the Castle of the Quest and my own people. He was not hasty to answer her, and she spake again: This must thou do, or else take me to the Red Hold and deliver me to the tyrant there; and I have heard it from thine own mouth that will be nought else than casting me into shame and torment and death. And I deem thou canst not do it. Nay, she said, staying the words that were coming from his mouth, I wot that thou canst do it if thine heart can suffer it; for thou art stronger than I, and thou mayst break my bow, and wrest this knife out of mine hand; and thou canst bind me and make me fast to the saddle, and so lead my helpless body into thraldom and death. But thou hast said that thou lovest me, and I believe thee herein. Therefore I know that thou canst not will to do this.

He answered in his surly voice: Thou art right, lady, I cannot. Nay, hearken thou this time. I

have been turning over night-long what thou didst say about leaving my lord, that is, betraying him, for it comes to that; and now I have made up my mind to do it, and I will betray him for thy sake. Wherefore there is a third way to take which thou hast not seen; we will ride out of this dale in an hour's time, and I will bring thee to them who are only less the mortal foes of the Red Knight than are thy fellows of the Quest, to wit, to the captain and burgesses of the good town of Greenford by the Water; and I will do them to wit that I have rescued thee from the hands of the Red Knight, and am become his foe; and will show them all his incomings and outgoings, and every whit of rede, and entrap him, so that he fall into their hands. Now, though were I to be taken in battle by them, I should be speedily brought to the halter, or may be to the bale-fire (for we be wizards all in the Red Hold); yet with this word in my mouth, if they trow in it, I shall be made their captain, and presently their master. Trow in my tale they will, if thou bear me out therein, and they will honour thee, and suffer thee to give thyself to me in marriage; and then I know thee, and myself also, and that ere long we shall be both mighty and wealthy and beloved, and fair will be the days before us.

His voice had grown softer as he spake, and toward the end of his words he faltered, and at last brake out a-weeping, and cast himself wordless on the grass before her.

She was pale, and her brow was knitted, and her

face quivered; but she spake coldly to him and said: This way I cannot take; and I wonder at thee that thou hast shown it unto me, for thyself thou knowest that I cannot go with thee. I will go nowhere hence save to the Castle of the Quest. If thou wilt not lead me thereto, or put me on the road, I ask thee straight, Wilt thou stay me if I go seek the way thither myself?

He rose up from the ground with a pale face full of anger as well as grief, and caught her by the wrists and said, scowling the while: Tell me now which of them it is; is it the stupid oaf Baudoin, or the light fool Hugh, or the dull pedant Arthur? But it matters not; for I know, and all the country-side knows, that they be vowed, each man of them, to his own woman; and if they find not the women themselves, such dolts they are, that they will ever be worshipping the mere shadows of them, and turn away from flesh and blood, were it the fairest in the world, as thou art, as thou art.

She shrank away from him what she might, but he still held her wrists; then she spake in a quivering voice, her very lips pale with fear and wrath: It is well seen that thou art a man of the Red Knight; and belike thou wouldst do with me as he would. But one thing I crave of thee, if there is any grain of mercy in thee, that thou wilt draw thy sword and thrust me through; thou mayst leave thine hold of me to get at the blade, I will not stir from where I stand. O! to think that I deemed thee well-nigh a true man.

He dropped her hands now and stood aloof from

her, staring at her, and presently cast himself on the ground, rolling about and tearing at the grass. She looked on him a moment or two, and then stepped forward and stooped to him, and touched his shoulder and said: Rise up, I bid thee, and be a man and not a wild beast.

So in a while he arose, and stood before her hang-dog-like; then she looked on him pitifully, and said: Fair sir and valiant knight, thou hast gone out of thy mind for a while, and thus hast thou shamed both me and thyself; and now thou wert best forget it, and therewithal my last words to thee.

Therewith she held out her hand to him, and he went on his knees and took it, sobbing, and kissed it. But she said, and smiled on him: Now I see that thou wilt do what I prayed of thee, and lead me hence and put me on the road to the Castle of the Quest. He said: I will lead thee to the Castle of the Quest.

Said Birdalone: Then shall it be as I promised, that I will be thy dear friend while both we live. And now, if thou canst, be a little merrier, and come and sit with me, and let us eat our meat, for I hunger.

He smiled, but woefully, and presently they sat down to their meat; and he strove to be somewhat merry of mood, and to eat as one at a feast; but whiles his heart failed him, and he set his teeth and tore at the grass, and his face was fierce and terrible to look on; but Birdalone made as if she heeded it nought, and was blithe and debonair with him.

And when they had done their meat he sat looking at her a while, and at last he said: Lady, dost thou deem that, when all is said, I have done somewhat for thee since first we met the day before yesterday at the lower end of the Black Valley? Yea, she said, as erst I spake, all things considered I deem that thou hast done much. And now, said he, I am to do more yet; for I am to lead thee to where henceforth I shall have no more part or lot in thee than if thou wert in heaven and I in hell. I pray thee say not so, said Birdalone; have I not said that I will be thy friend? Lady, said the knight, I wot well that according to the sweetness of thine heart wilt thou do what thou canst do. And therewith he was silent a while and she also.

Then he said: I would ask thee a grace if I durst. Ask it, said she, and I will grant it if I may; I have gainsaid thee enough meseemeth.

Lady, he said, I will ask this as a reward of the way-leader, to wit, that thou abide with me here in this dale, in all honour holden, till to-morrow morning; and let this place, which has helped me aforetime, be hallowed by thy dwelling here; and I, I shall have had one happy day at least, if never another. Canst thou grant me this? If thou canst not, we will depart in an hour.

Her countenance fell at his word, and she was silent a while; for sore she longed to be speedily whereas her friends should find her if they came back to the castle. But she thought within herself how wild and fierce the man was, and doubted if he might not go stark mad on her hands and de-

stroy her if she thwarted overmuch; and, moreover, frankly she pitied him, and would do what she might to ease his pain and solace his grief of heart. Wherefore she cleared her face of its trouble and let it be vexed no longer, but smiled upon the knight and said: Fair sir, this meseemeth but a little thing for me to do, and I grant it thee with a good will, and this shall now be the first day of the friendship if so thou wilt take it; and may it solace thee.

Who then was gleeful but the knight, and strange it was to see all his sorrow run off him; and he became glad and gamesome as a youth, and yet withal exceeding courteous and kind with her, as though he were serving a mighty queen.

So then they wore the day together in all good fellowship; and first they went up the dale together and right to the foot of that great force, where the stream came thundering down from the sheer rocks; and long Birdalone stood to look thereon, and much she marvelled at it, for no such thing had she seen before.

Thereafter they went afoot into the wood behind the green bower, and when they had gone some way therein for their pleasure, they fell to seeking venison for their dinner; and the knight took Birdalone's bow and shafts to strike the quarry withal, but he would have her gird his sword to her, that she might not be weaponless. So they gat them a roe and came back therewith to the bower, and the knight dight it and cooked it, and again they ate in fellowship and kindness; and Birdalone had

been to the river and fetched thence store of blue-flowered mouse-ear, and of meadow-sweet, whereof was still some left from the early days of summer, and had made her garlands for her head and her loins; and the knight sat and worshipped her, yet he would not so much as touch her hand, sorely as he hungered for the beauty of her body.

Next, when dinner was done, and they lay in the shadow of the trees, and hearkened the moor-hen crying from the water, and the moaning of the wood-doves in the high trees, she turned to him and bade him tell her somewhat of the tale of his life and deeds; but he said: Nay, lady, I pray thee pardon me, for little have I to tell thee that is good, and I would not have thee know of me aught worse than thou knowest of me already. Rather be thou kind to me, and tell me of thy days that have been, wherein I know full surely shall be nought but good.

She smiled and blushed, but without more ado fell to telling him of her life in the House under the Wood, and spared not even to tell him somewhat of the wood-mother. And he said no word to her thereover, save thanks and praises for the kindness of her story.

At last the day wore to its ending, and then the knight's grief strode over him again, and he was moody and few-spoken; and Birdalone was blithe with him still, and would have solaced his grief; but he said: Let it be; as for thee, thou shalt be happy to-morrow, but this happy day of mine is well-nigh worn, and it is as the wearing of my life.

And the dark night came, and he bade her good-night sorrowfully, and departed to his lair in the wood. Birdalone lay in the bower, and might not sleep a long while for her joy of the morrow, which should bring her back to the Castle of the Quest.

But when morning was, and the sun was but just risen, Birdalone awoke, and stood up and did on her raiment, and called her servant the knight, and he came at once leading the two horses, and said: Now go we to the Castle of the Quest. And he was sober and sorrowful, but nought fierce or wild.

So Birdalone thanked him kindly and praised him, and he changed countenance no whit therefor.

Then they mounted and set forth, and the knight led straight into the wood, and by roads that he wotted of, so that they went nowise slowly for wenders through the thick woodland. Thus went they on their way together, he sorry and she glad.

But now leaves the tale to tell of Birdalone and the knight on whom she happened in the Black Valley of the Greywethers, and turns to the Castle of the Quest and the folk thereof, and what they did in this while and thereafter.

Here ends the Fourth Part of the Water of the Wondrous Isles, which is called Of the Days of Abiding, and the Fifth Part now begins, which is called The Tale of the Quest's Ending.

THE WATER OF THE WONDROUS ISLES. THE FIFTH PART: THE TALE OF THE QUEST'S ENDING.

CHAPTER I. OF SIR LEONARD'S TROUBLE AND THE COMING OF THE QUEST.

TELLS the tale that when the chaplain had departed from Birdalone at the bower in the copse, he went home to the castle sadly enough, because of his love and longing for her, which well he wotted might never be satisfied. Moreover when he was come into the castle again, there fell fear upon him for what might betide her, and he rued it that he had done her will in getting her forth of the castle; and in vain now he set before himself all the reasons for deeming that her peril herein was little or nothing, even as he had laid them before her, and which he then believed in utterly, whereas now himseemed there was an answer to every one of them. So he sighed heavily and went into the chapel, wherein was an altar of St. Leonard; and he knelt thereat, and prayed the saint, as he had erst delivered folk from captivity, now to deliver both him and Birdalone from peril and bonds; but though he was long a-praying and made many words, it lightened his heart little or nothing; so that when he rose up again, that if anything evil happened to this pearl of women, he wished heartily that some one might take his life and he be done with it.

Now was the house astir, and the chaplain came from out the chapel, and thinking all things over, he thought he would go straight to Sir Aymeris and make a clean breast of it, so that weaponed men might be sent at once to seek Birdalone. And he said to himself: What matter if he slay me or cast me into prison, if Birdalone be lost?

So he went his ways to the highest tower, which looked landward and hight the Open Eye, deeming to find Sir Aymeris; but when he got to the topmost, he found neither captain nor carle there: wherefore he stayed a little and looked forth betwixt the battlements, if perchance there were some wild chance of seeing Birdalone's coming home again; but his keen eyes beheld nothing more than he looked to see, as sheep and neat, and the field-folk of thereabouts. So he turned away and went by the swale toward the next tallest tower, which looked lakewards, and was called Hearts' Hope; and as he went he fell to framing in his mind the words which he should say to the castellan.

Thus came he, haggard and hapless, on the leads of the tower, which were nought small; and there gathered together in a knot, and all gazing eagerly out over the lake, he found a dozen of men-at-arms and the castellan amongst them. They took no heed of him as he came up, though he stumbled as he crossed the threshold and came clattering over the lead floor, and he saw at once that there was something unwonted toward; but he had but one thought in his mind, to wit, the rescuing of Birdalone.

He went up now behind where the castellan was leaning over the battlement, and pulled his skirt, and when Sir Aymeris turned round, he said: Lord, I have a word for thine ear. But the old knight did but half turn round, and then spake peevishly: Tush, man! another time! seest thou not I have got no eyes for aught save what we see on the lake? Yea, but what then? said the priest. There cometh a boat, said Sir Aymeris, not looking back at him, and our thought is that therein be our lords.

When the priest heard that word, it was to him as if hell had opened underneath his feet; and he had no might to speak for a minute; then he cried out: Sir Aymeris, hearken, I pray thee. But the old knight but thrust him back with his hand, and even therewith one of the men-at-arms cried out: I hear the voice of their horn! Then shouted Sir Aymeris: Where art thou, Noise? Blow, man, blow, if ever thou blewest in all thy life! And therewithal came the blare of the brass, and Sir Aymeris nodded to the trumpeter, who blew blast after blast with all his might, so that the priest might as well have been dumb for any hearing he might get; and all the while to Leonard the minutes seemed hours, and he was well-nigh distraught.

And then when the knight held up his hand for the Noise to stay his blowing, and Leonard strove to speak, the castellan turned on him and said: Peace, Sir Leonard; dost thou not know that now we would listen with our ears to heed if they answer

us? Not a word any one man of you, learned or lewd, or ye shall rue it!

Even therewith came clearly the sound of the horn from the water, and again and yet again; and no man spake but the chaplain, who cried out: Hearken, knight, it is of Birdalone. But Sir Aymeris laid his hand on his shoulder and said in an angry whisper: Thou shalt be put downstairs, priest, if thou hold not thy peace.

Leonard drew aback scowling, and went out of the door, and so slowly down the stair, and withdrew him into the cover of the door of the first chamber down from the tower-top, with the mind to waylay Sir Aymeris as he came down; and meanwhile he cursed him for a fool and a dull-wit, and himself yet more, as was but right, for a fool and a licorous traitor.

But he had not tarried there more than a score of minutes, ere he heard a great shout from those up above: They are come! they are come! And next thereafter came all the men clattering down the stair past him, scarce refraining them from shoving each his neighbour on to the next one; Leonard followed on them, and presently arose great shouting and tumult through all the house, and all folk, men and women, hurried flock-meal toward the water-gate, and with them went Leonard perforce; and sick of heart he was, calling to mind the first coming thither of Birdalone.

But now when they came to the water-gate, there verily was the Sending Boat just coming to hand;

and in the stern stood the three knights together, all clad in their armour, and before them sat three lovely ladies, clad one in gold, one in green, and one in black: and lo, there was the Quest come home.

wept not, and but said to Arthur: Go thou, it is meet.

Therewith were the ladies brought to fair chambers; but the three knights went with the priest and Sir Aymeris into the solar, and set a guard at the door that their talk should be privy.

CHAPTER III. HOW THEY FOLLOW THE SLOT OF BIRDALONE AND THE BLACK KNIGHT.

IT was but five minutes ere the priest had told them all that need was; so they let him abide alone there, though sooth to say there was none of them but had good will to break his neck; and the same rede had all three, that there was nought for it but to go their ways with all speed to the Black Valley of the Greywethers, and follow up the slot of Birdalone if it might yet be found; wherefore they bade saddle their horses straightway; and while that was a-doing they ate a morsel, and bade farewell to their lovelings. And they dight them to go, they three together, with but one squire and a sergeant, who were both of them keen trackers and fell woodsmen. But ere they went, by the rede of Arthur they bade Sir Aymeris to arm a two score of men and ride toward the Red Hold, and beset the ways 'twixt that and the Castle of the Quest; for one and all they deemed that if any harm befell Birdalone, the Red Knight would be at the bottom of it.

So rode those fellows, and came unto the dale but some four hours after Birdalone had happened on the stranger knight; and they took up the slot of her, but not easily, whereas the ground was hard and stony; howbeit, they found tokens of the knight also, finding here and there what they deemed the footprints of a tall man. And this was grievous to those fellows, since now they could

not but deem that somewhat untoward had befallen Birdalone. But they went on making out the slot, and they followed it with much toil until they came to the doom-ring in the head of the dale, whereas Birdalone and the stranger had sat down to meat; but by that time, so toilsome had been their going, it was somewhat more than dusk, and there was nought for it but to abide there night-long. So a while they sat talking, all of them, and the squire and the sergeant aforesaid were not a little timorous of the adventure of making that stead unkenned their sleeping chamber; and to while away the time, their lords made them tell tales such as they knew concerning that place; and both they said that they had never erst come into the dale but a very little way, and said that they had done so then but trusting in their lords' bidding and the luck of the Quest. Thereafter turned the talk as to what had befallen Birdalone, and the chances of coming on her; and, as folk will in such a plight, they talked the matter over and over again till they were weary and could say no more.

Then they went to sleep, and nought befell them till they awoke in the broad daylight; but they had little inkling of what hour it was, for all the dale was full of thick white mist that came rolling down from the mountains, so that they could scarce see their hands before them, and there they had to tarry still, would they, would they not; and the sergeant fell to telling tales of folk who had been lost in that stony maze; and all of them deemed, more or less, that this was the work either

of evil wights, or it might be of the wizardry of the Red Knight; and, to be short, they all deemed that he it was who had wielded it, save the sergeant, who said that the mountain wights were the masters and not the servants of him of the Red Hold.

Thus, then, it betided; but when the said mist had been hanging upon them for some six hours, it rolled up like a curtain, and lo the blue sky and the sun, and the mountains as clear blue as in a picture; and they saw by the sun that it was but a little after high noon.

But as they rejoiced herein, and betook them once more to tracking out the slot of Birdalone and the other, the sky became suddenly overcast, and down from the jaws of the mountain came a storm of wind and rain, and thunder and lightning, so great that they might scarce see each other's faces, and when it cleared off, in about an hour and a half, and went down the wind to the south-east, the stream was waxen great, and ran brown and furious down the dale, so that it was fordable only here and there; and as for tracking the slot of those twain, there was no need to talk thereof, for the fury of the driving rain had washed all away.

Thus fared they the whole day betwixt fog and clear weather, and they laid them down to rest at night sore disheartened. When the day broke they talked together as to what was best to do; and the sergeant aforesaid spake: Lords, said he, meseemeth I am more at home in the Black Valley than ye be; heed ye not wherefore. Now so it is that

if we tarry here till night come we wot not what of evil may betide us, or at the least we do nought. Or if we turn back and go southward out of the dale we shall be safe indeed; but safe should we have been at your house, lords, and should have done no less. But now I shall tell you that, if ye will, lords, I shall guide you to a pass that goeth out of the head of the dale to our right hands, and so turneth the flank of the mountains, and cometh out into the country which lieth about the Red Hold; and meseemeth it is thitherward that we must seek if we would hear any tidings of the lady; for there may we lay in ambush and beset the ways that lead up to the Hold, by which she must have been brought if she hath not been carried through the air. How say ye, lords? Soothly there is peril therein; yet meseemeth peril no more than in our abiding another night in the Black Valley.

Said Arthur: We heed not the peril if there be aught to be done; wherefore let us be stirring straightway. And so said they all. Wherefore they gat to horse, and rode up to the very head of the valley, and the weather was now calm and bright.

But the sergeant brought them to the pass whereof the stranger knight had spoken to Bird-alone, which led into the Red Knight's country, and without more ado they entered it when it was now about three hours after noon. But the way was both steep and rough, so that they had much toil, and went not very far ere night fell upon them, and the moon was not yet up. So when they had

stumbled on another two hours, and their horses were much spent and they themselves not a little weary, they laid them down to sleep, after they had eaten such meat as they had with them, in a place where was a little grass for the horses to bite; for all the road hitherto had been mere grim stones and big rocks, walled on either side by stony screes, above which rose steep and beetling crags.

In the dawn they arose again, and made no ado till they were in the saddle, and rode till they came to the crest of the pass, and came out thence after a while on to the swelling flank of a huge mountain (as it might be the side of the mountain of Plinlimmon in Wales), which was grassed and nought craggy, but utterly treeless.

Now the sergeant led them somewhat athwart the said mountain till they began to go down, and saw below them a country of little hills much covered with wood, and in a while, and ere it was noon, they were among the said woods, which were grown mostly with big trees, as oak here and beech there, and the going was good for them.

CHAPTER IV. OF THE SLAYING OF FRIEND AND FOE.

SO came they, three hours after noon, to where was a clearing in the woodland, and a long narrow plain some furlong over lay before them, with a river running along it, and the wood rose on the other side high and thick, so that the said plain looked even as a wide green highway leading from somewhence to somewhither.

At the edge hereof their way-leader, the sergeant, bade draw rein, and said: Lords, we are now in the lands of the Red Hold, and therein is mickle peril and dread to any save stout hearts as ye be; but meseems we are so steaded, that whatever may come out of the Black Valley of the Greywethers to the Red Hold, ye now may scarce miss. Yonder along this plain to the north lies the way to the said Hold, and any man coming from the head of the valley is sure to come by the way we have come, and will pass us not many yards at the worst from where we now be. On the other hand, if any come to the Hold from the mouth of the Black Valley, then along this green road must they needs pass under your very eyes. Lastly, if we do what we are come to do, to wit, to deliver the lady from the Red Knight, then, the deed done, we have to take the green road southward, and ride it for a league and then turn east, and we shall have our heads turned toward the Castle of the Quest, and shall speedily fall in with Sir Aymeris and our men who be guarding the out-gates of the Red

Knight's country toward our house. So now, by my rede, ye shall lay in covert here and abide a while what may befall; if nought come hereby ere two hours be lacking of sunset, then may we seek further.

They all yeasaid this, and gat off their horses, and lay quiet on the grass, not even speaking save softly. And when they had abided thus scarce an hour's space, the squire, who was a man of very fine ear, held up his hand as though to bid utter silence, and all hearkened eagerly. Presently he said: Hear ye not? Said Arthur: Meseemeth I hear a faint tinkle as of a sheep-bell. Said the squire: 'Tis the clashing of swords down the plain to the south, and meseemeth 'tis but of two: ride we thither?

Quoth Baudoin: Nay, not by my rede; for if we can hear them they can hear us; let us quietly edge along afoot somewhat nigher their way, ever keeping the cover of the wood betwixt us and the open plain. Now then to it; and let each man keep his weapons ready.

Even so did they, and spread out in a line as they went, in such wise that there was some six paces betwixt each man of them, and they went softly forward; Baudoin went first, Hugh second, then Arthur; then the squire and the sergeant last of all.

Now when they had gone but a quarter of an hour, the squire caught up with Arthur, and spake to him softly, and said: The voice of the swords has been silent now a while, and I heard a voice

crying out e'en now, a woman's voice. And now again I could well-nigh deem that I hear horse-hoofs.

Arthur nodded to him, and they went but a little further ere he said: Lo, lo! 'tis the time of the eyes now! Here come folk. And therewithal they stayed them. For the wood turned somewhat here, so as to hide all but a little of the plain, and round the wood neb the new-comers hove in sight, and were close on them at once, so that they might see them clearly, to wit, a knight weaponed, clad all in red, a very big man, riding on a great bay horse, and behind him a woman going afoot in very piteous plight; for she was tethered to the horse's crupper by a thong that bound her wrists together, so that she had but just room left 'twixt her and the horse that she might walk, and round about her neck was hung a man's head newly hewn off.

This sight they all saw at once, and were out of the wood in a trice with weapons aloft, for they knew both the man and the woman, that they were the Red Knight and Birdalone.

So swift and sudden had they been, that he had no time either to spur or even to draw his sword; but he had a heavy steel axe in his hand as the first man came up to him, which was the tall Baudoin; and therewith he smote down on Baudoin so fierce and huge a stroke, that came on him betwixt neck and shoulder, that all gave way before it, and the Golden Knight fell to earth all carven and stark dead: but even therewith fell Hugh, the squire, and the sergeant on the Red Knight; for Arthur had

run to Birdalone and sheared her loose from her tether. The sergeant smote him on the right arm with a maul, so that the axe fell to the ground; the squire's sword came on the side of his head, and, as it was cast back beneath the stroke, Hugh thrust his sword through the throat of him, and down he fell unto the earth and was dead in less than a minute.

Then gathered the others round about Baudoin, and saw at once that he was dead; and Birdalone came thrusting through the press of them, and knelt down beside him, and when she saw her friend so piteously dight, she wept and wailed over him as one who might not be comforted; and Hugh stood over her and let his tears fall down upon the dead man; and withal the squire and the sergeant did not refrain their lamentations, for sore beloved was Sir Baudoin the Golden Knight.

But Arthur spake dry-eyed, though there was grief in his countenance, and he said: Fellows, and thou, lady, let us lament afterwards, but now is time for us to get us gone hence as speedily as may be. Yet I will ask, doth any know whose is this head that the slain tyrant here had hung about the lady's neck? May the fiends curse him therefor!

Said the sergeant: Yea, lords, that wot I; this is the head of the Red Knight's captain and head man, Sir Thomas of Estcliffe; one of the hardiest of knights he was while he was alive, as ye surely wot, lords; neither, as I have heard say, was he as cruel a tyrant as his lord that lieth there ready for the ravens.

Now had Birdalone arisen and was standing facing Arthur; her face was pale and full of anguish, and she was dabbled with blood from the dead man's neck; but there was nought of shame in her face as she stood there and spoke: O my living friends, who have but now saved me, ye and my dead friends, from what shame and death I know not, the tale of this woeful hap is over long to tell if there be peril at hand, and I scarce alive from dread and sorrow; but shortly thus it is: This man, whose head here lieth, entrapped me as I foolishly wandered in the Black Valley, and afterwards delivered me, and was leading me to your castle, my friends, when this other one, his master, the tyrant of the Red Hold, came upon him, and fell upon him and slew him as a traitor, and dighted me as ye saw. And woe's me! I am the fool whose folly has slain your friend and mine. Wherefore I am not worthy of your fellowship, and ye shall cast me forth of it; or to slay me were better.

So she spake, gazing earnestly on Arthur; and so troubled and grieved, that she might well have died but for her woodland breeding, and the toil of the days she had won through in the House under the Wood.

But Hugh spake gently to her and said: Keep up thine heart yet, maiden; for the hand of Fate it is that led thee, and none doeth grievously amiss but if he mean wrong-doing in his heart; and we know thee for true; and thou hast been our helper, and brought our lovelings unto us to make us happy.

But she brake out weeping afresh, and said: O no, no! it is but woe and weariness I have brought unto my friends; and to myself woe and weariness yet more.

And she looked piteously into Arthur's face, and hard and stern it seemed unto her; and she writhed and wrung her hands for anguish. But he spake and said: This will we look into when we be safe behind our walls, and see what she hath done amiss and what not amiss. But now is there but one thing to do, and that is to get us speedily on our way to the Castle of the Quest, and bind our fellow's body on his horse that he also may ride with us, and the lady shall ride the horse of the accursed thief. Then they turned to go toward their horses; but therewith Birdalone smote her foot against the slain knight's head, and shrank aback from it, and pointed down toward it and spake no word; and Hugh said: Friends, the lady is right, this at least we will cover with earth. Do ye go fetch hither our horses, since we be on the road, and I will do here what need is meanwhile.

So they went on that errand, and then Hugh and Birdalone between them dug a hole with the swords and laid the head of the captain of the Red Knight therein. And forsooth, somewhat would Birdalone have wept for him had she had a tear to spare.

Then they fell to and bound the dead Baudoin on the Red Knight's mighty bay steed, so that no time might be wasted; and when that was done, and the others had not come back with their horses, Hugh took Birdalone's hand and led her down to

the stream and washed the gore off her bosom, and she washed her face and her hands and let him lead her back again in such wise that now she could hearken to the words of comfort he spake to her, and piteous kind he seemed unto her; so that at last she plucked up heart, and asked him how Viridis did. Quoth he: They be all safe at home in the castle, and Viridis is well and loveth thee well. And Aurea was well, woe worth the while for her now! As for Atra, she has not been so glad as the other twain, I wot not wherefore.

Even as he spake were the others come up with the horses, and Arthur nodded yeasay when he saw what had been done with Baudoin dead; and so they gat to horse, and Birdalone it was that rode Baudoin's steed. Then they went their ways, crossing the river into the wood; and the sergeant was ever way-leader, but the squire led the horse which bore the sorrowful burden of the dead Knight of the Quest.

CHAPTER V. THEY COME HOME TO THE CASTLE OF THE QUEST.

NOW they had gone but some three hours, riding dreary and nigh speechless all of them, ere they began to know the land they were in, and that they were coming to the place where they might look presently to fall in with Sir Aymeris and his company; and even so the meeting betid, that they saw men standing and going about their horses beside a little wood, and knew them presently for their folk, who mounted at once and spurred forward to meet them, spears aloft. Speedily then was the joy of those abiders turned into sorrow, nor may the grief of Sir Aymeris be told, so great it was; and Birdalone looked on and saw the mourning and lamentation of the warriors, and eked was her anguish of mind; and she beheld Arthur the Black Squire, how he sat still upon his horse with a hard and dreary countenance, and looked on those mourners almost as if he contemned them. But Sir Aymeris came up to Birdalone, and knelt before her and kissed her hand, and said: If my heart might rejoice in aught, as some day it will, it would rejoice in seeing thee safe and sound, lady; here at least is gain to set beside the loss.

She thanked him, but looked askance toward Arthur, who said: If that be gain, yet is there more, for the Red Knight lieth in the green plain for a supper to the wolf and the crow. Vengeance there hath been, and belike more yet may come. But

now, if ye have lamented as much as ye deem befitteth warriors, let us tarry here no longer; for even yet meseemeth shall we be safer behind walls, now that our chief and captain is slain, I scarce know in what quarrel.

None naysaid it, so they all rode forth together, and the sergeant and the squire and Sir Hugh told of their tale what they might to Sir Aymeris and the others; but Arthur held his peace, and rode aloof from Birdalone, whereas Sir Aymeris and Hugh rode on either side of her, and did not spare to comfort her what they might.

They rode straight on, and made no stay for nightfall, and thus came home to the Castle of the Quest before the day was full; and woeful was their entry as they went in the dawn underneath the gate of the said castle, and soon was the whole house astir and lamenting.

As for Birdalone, when she got down from her horse in the gateway, and was stiff and weary of body, and all dazed and confused of mind, there was but little life in her; nor could she so much as think of the new day and Aurea's awakening, but crept up unto her own chamber, so long as it seemed since she had left it, though it was but a little while; and she cast herself upon the bed and fell asleep whether she would or not, and so forgat her much sorrow and her little hope.

CHAPTER VI. OF THE TALK BETWIXT BIRDALONE AND VIRIDIS.

WHEN she woke again, she had slept the night away, and it was broad day, and for a moment she lay wondering what was the burden upon her; but presently she called it all to mind, and deemed it were well might she forget it all again. Anon she became aware of someone moving about the chamber, and she looked about unhappily; and lo! a woman, fair and dainty, clad all in green, and it was Viridis that had come there. But when she saw Birdalone stirring, she came up to her and kissed her sweetly and kindly, and wept over her, so that Birdalone might nowise refrain her tears. But when she might cease weeping, she said to Viridis: Tell me, art thou weeping for thy friend who is lost, and who shall be thy friend no more; or thy friend whom thou hast found? Said Viridis: Forsooth I have wept for Baudoin plenteously, and he is worthy of it, for he was valiant and true and kind. Said Birdalone: True is that; but I meant not my question so; but rather I would ask thee if thou weepest because thine heart must needs cast me away, or because thou hast found me again? Quoth Viridis: Whoso may be dead, or whoso alive, but if it were Hugh, my loveling, I were rejoiced beyond measure to find thee, my friend. And again she kissed her as one who was glad and kind. But for new rest of soul and for joy, Birdalone fell a-weeping afresh.

Again she spake: And what mind have the

others about me? For thou art but one, though the dearest, save . . . And would they punish me for my fault and folly that has slain the best man in the world? If the punishment be short of putting me forth of their fellowship, I were fain thereof.

Viridis laughed: Forsooth, she said, they have much to punish thee for! whereas it was by thy doing and thy valiance that we all came together again and the Quest was accomplished. Nay, but tell me, said Birdalone, what do they say of me, each one of them?

Viridis reddened; she said: Hugh, my mate, saith all good of thee; though no one of carl-folk may be sorrier of the loss of his fellow. Aurea layeth not the death of her man upon thee; and she saith: When the fountain of tears is dried up in me, I will see her and comfort her, as she me. Atra saith: she saith but little, yet she saith: So is it fated. I had done belike no better, but worse than she.

Now turned Birdalone red and then pale again, and she said, but in a quavering voice: And the Black Squire, Arthur, what sayeth he? Said Viridis: He sayeth nought of thee, but that he would hear all the tale of what befell thee in the Black Valley. Sweet friend, said Birdalone, I pray thee of thy kindness and sweetness that thou go unto him presently and bring him in hither, and then I will tell him all; and he and thou and I together.

Viridis said: There is this to be said, that when a man loveth a woman he coveteth her, to have her

all wholly to himself, and hard and evil he groweth for the time that he misdoubteth her whom he loveth. And I will tell thee that this man is jealous lest thou wert never so little kind to the slain stranger knight whose head the tyrant hung about thee. Furthermore, I fear there is no help for it that thou wilt undo the happiness of one of us, that is Atra; yet were it better that that befell later than sooner. And if Sir Arthur come in here to thee, and hath thy tale with none beside save me, meseems the poor Atra will feel a bitter smart because of it. Were it not better that we all meet presently in the solar, and that there thou tell thy tale to us all? and thereafter shall we tell the tale of our deliverance and our coming hither. And thus doing, it will seem less like to the breaking up of our fellowship.

Said Birdalone: It will be hard for me to tell my tale before Atra and before him. Might it not be that thou hearken to it here and now, and tell it to the others hereafter? Nay, nay, said Viridis, I am not a proper minstrel to take the word out of thy mouth. Never shall I be able to tell it so that they shall trow it as if they had seen it all. Besides, when all is told, then shall we be more bound together again. I pray thee, and I pray thee, sweet, do so much for me as to tell thy tale to the fellowship of us. And if it be hard to thee, look upon it as my share of the punishment which is due to thee for falling into that mishap.

Smiled Birdalone ruefully, and said: So be it; and may the share of the others be as light as thine,

sister. Yet soothly were I liefer that my body and my skin should pay the forfeit. But now, since I must needs do this, the sooner is the better me-seemeth.

In a little half hour, said Viridis, will I bring what is left of our fellowship into the solar to hearken thee. So come thou there unto us when thou art clad. And hear thou! be not too meek and humble, and bow thyself to us in fear of our sorrow. For whereas thou didst speak of our punishing thee, there will be one there whom thou mayst easily punish to thy pleasure; forsooth, friend, I rue that so it is; but since it will not better be, what may I do but wish thee happy and him also.

Therewith she turned and went out of the chamber, and Birdalone, left to herself, felt a secret joy in her soul that she might not master, despite the sorrow of her friends, whatever it might be.

CHAPTER VII. BIRDALONE TELLETH THE TALE OF HER WANDERING UP THE VALLEY OF THE GREYWETHERS.

NOW Viridis did as she said, and brought them all into the solar; there was none lacking save Baudoin, and they sat silently in a half ring, till the door opened and Birdalone came in to them, clad all simply in but a black coat; and she made obeisance to them, and stood there with her head bent down as if they were her judges, for so in sooth she deemed them. Then Hugh bade her sit down amongst them; but she said: Nay, I will not sit amongst you till ye have heard my story, and ye have told me that I am yet of your fellowship. None said aught; Atra looked straight before her, and her eyes met not Birdalone's eyes; Arthur looked down on the ground; but Hugh and Viridis looked kindly on Birdalone, and to Viridis' eyes the tears were come.

Then spake Birdalone and said: I am here as one that hath done amiss; but I will tell you, so that ye may not think worse of me than ye should, that when ye were gone, ye Champions, and the time wore long that ye came not again, it lay heavy on my heart, and hope waned and fear waxed, and my soul so grieved my body that I thought to fall sick thereof, and I knew that it would be ill for you to come home hither and find me sick; so that I longed sore to do somewhat which should make me whole again. Then weird would that I should

hear all the tale of the Black Valley of the Greywethers, and of how therein is whiles granted fulfilment of desire; and methought how well it were if I might seek the adventure there and accomplish it. Thereof, doubtless, hath the chaplain, Sir Leonard, told you; but this furthermore would I say, that his doing herein was nought; all was done by my doing and by my bidding, and he might not choose but do it. Wherefore I do pray you all earnestly that ye keep no grudge against him, but pardon him all. Tell me, then, will ye do thus much?

Said Hugh: Let him be pardoned, if he can take pardon. But Arthur spake not, and Birdalone looked on him anxiously, and her face was moved, and it was with her throat as if she had swallowed something down. Then she spake again, and fell to tell them all that had betid to her when she went to the Black Valley, even as is hereafore writ, hiding nought that had been done and said; and freely she told it, without fear or shame, and with such clearness and sweetness of words that no one of them doubted her aught; and Arthur lifted up his head, and once and again his eyes met hers, and there was nought of hardness in them, though they turned away at once.

So at last fell Birdalone to telling what betid after they two, the stranger knight and she, left the valley of the force and fell to riding the wildwood with their heads turned toward the Castle of the Quest; and she said:

When we turned into the wood away from the

said valley it lacked some four hours of noon; and we rode till noon was, and rested by a stream-side and ate, for we knew no cause wherefore we should hasten overmuch; but my fellow the strange knight was downcast and heavy, and some might have called him sullen. But I strove to make him of better cheer, and spake to him kindly, as to one who of an enemy had become a friend; but he answered me: Lady, it availeth not; I grieve that I am no better company than thou seest me, and I have striven to be merrier; but apart from all that I wot and that thou wottest which should make me of evil cheer, there is now a weight upon my heart which I cannot lift, such as never have I felt erst. So by thy leave we will to horse at once, that we may the speedier come to the Castle of the Quest and Sir Aymeris' prison.

So I arose, but smiled on him and said: Hold up thine heart, friend! for thee shall be no prison at the Castle of the Quest, but the fair welcome of friends. He said nought, and mended not his cheer; and in this plight we gat to horse and rode on for some three hours more, till we came out of the thick forest into a long clearing, which went like a wide highway of greensward between the thicket, and it seemed as if the hand of man had cleared that said green road. Thereto we had come, following a little river which came out on to the clearing with us, and then, turning, ran well-nigh amidst it toward the north.

Now when we were come thither, and were betwixt the thicket and the water's edge, we drew

rein, and it seemed to me as fair a stead as might be in the woodland, and I looked thereon well pleased and with a happy heart. But the knight said: Lady, art thou not exceeding weary? Nay, said I, not in any wise. Said he: It is strange then, for so weary am I, that I must in any case get off my horse and lay me down on the grass here, or I shall drop from the saddle. And therewith he lighted down and stood by me a little, as to help me off my horse; but I said to him: Knight, I pray thee, even if ye be weary, to struggle forward a little, lest we be in peril here. In peril? quoth he; yea, that might be if the Red Knight knew of our whereabouts; but how should that be? He spoke this heavily, as one scarce awake; and then he said: I pray thee pardon me, lady, but for nought may I hold my head up; suffer me to sleep but a little, and then will I arise and lead thee straight to thy journey's end. Therewithal he laid him down on the grass and was presently asleep, and I sat down by him all dismayed. At first, indeed, I doubted some treachery in him, for how might I trust him wholly after all that had come and gone? but when I saw that there was no feigning in his sleep, I set that doubt aside, and knew not what to make of it.

Thus passed an hour, and from time to time I shook him and strove to waken him, but it was all in vain; so I knew none other rede than to abide his awakening; for I knew not the way to take toward this castle; and, moreover, though he were a knight, and armed, yet might it be perilous for

him if he were left there alone and unguarded; so I abode.

But now came new tidings. Methought I heard the sound of the tinkling of weapons and armour; the green highway so turned that a wood neb about an hundred yards to the north hid it from my sight, so that a man might have drawn somewhat near to us without being seen, came he on the hither side of the river. So I stood up hastily, and strung my bow, and took a shaft in my fingers, and no sooner was it done than there came a rider round about the aforesaid wood neb. He was all-armed and had a red surcoat, and rode a great shining bay horse. I kept my eye upon him while I stirred the sleeping knight with my foot, and cried to him to wake, but he scarce moved, and but uttered words without sense.

Now the new-comer drew rein for a moment when he saw us, and then moved on a little toward me, but I nocked a shaft and pointed it at him, and cried out to him to stay. Then I heard a great rattling laugh come from him, and he shouted: Nay, do thou stay, fair wood-wife, and I will risk thy shafts to come at thee. But why doth not the sluggard at thy feet rise up and stand before me, if he be thy loveling? Or is he dead? His voice was harsh and big, and I feared him sore; and it was as much because of fear as of hardihood, that I drew and loosed straightway; and doubtless it was because of fear that I saw my shaft fly an inch or so over his right shoulder. I heard his ratling laugh again, and saw him bend forward as he

spurred; I knew that time lacked for drawing another shaft, so I caught up my skirts and ran all I might; but swift-foot as I be, it availed me nought, for I was cumbered with my gown, and moreover I was confused with not knowing whither to run, since I wotted that in the water the horse would do better than I.

So he was up with me in a twinkling, and reached out his hand and caught hold of me by the hair, and tugged me to him as he reined back his horse. Then he laughed again and said: Forsooth she will look better when she is no longer reddened and roughened with fleeing; and, by Red Peter! what limbs she hath. Then he let me loose and got off his horse, and shoved me on before him till we came to where the Black One lay still sleeping heavily. Then the Red Knight stood over against me, and looked hard into my face; and I saw how huge a man he was, and how a lock of bright red hair came out from under his sallet. His eyes were green and fierce underneath shaggy red eyebrows; terrible he was to look on.

Now he spake fiercely and roughly, and as though he had something against me: Tell me, thou, who thou art and who this is? I answered nought, for fear had frozen my speech. He stamped his foot on the ground and cried: Hah! art thou gone dumb? Speak! thou wert best! I said, all quaking: My name is Birdalone; I belong to no one; I have no kindred: as for this man, I know not his name. He said: Comest thou from the Castle of the Quest? Art thou the whore of those lily-

and-rose champions there? My heart was hot with anger in spite of my dread, but I spake: I came from the Castle of the Quest. He said: And this man (therewith he turned about and spurned him in the side), where didst thou happen upon him? Again I was silent, and he roared out at me: So thou wilt not answer! Beware, or I may see how to compel the speech of thee. Now answer me this: Was it in the Black Valley of the Grey-wethers that ye two came together? Again I knew not how to answer, lest I might do a wrong to him who had repented him of the wrong he had done me. But the Red Knight burst out a-laughing and said: It shall be remembered against thee, first, that thou didst let fly a shaft at me; second, that thou didst run from me; and thirdly, that thou hast been slack in answering my questions. But all this scathes me nought; first, because thy shaft missed me; second, because thy legs failed thee (though they were fair to look on, running); and third, because all thou canst tell me I know without thine answering. Now thee will I tell that this is Friday, and that ye two first met in the Black Valley on Tuesday; now I will ask this last question, and thou mayst answer it or not as thou wilt; for presently I shall wake this brisk and stirring knight, and I deem that he will tell me the truth of this if of nought else. Tell me, thou whore of the Questing Champions, where and how many times thou hast lain in this good knight's arms since last Tuesday? Nowhere and never, quoth I. Thou liest, I doubt thee, said the Red Knight; howso-

ever, let us see what this doughty one will say. Hah! thou deemest he shall be hard to wake up, dost thou not! Well, I shall see to that. He who giveth sleep may take it away again.

Therewith he went up to the Black One and stooped adown over his head, and spake some words over him, but so softly that I heard not their import; and straightway the sleeper rose up so suddenly that he wellnigh smote against the Red Knight. He stood awhile staggering, and blinking at the other one, but somehow got his sword drawn forth, and the Red Knight hindered him nought therein, but spake anon when the other was come to himself somewhat: The sele of the day to thee, Sir Thomas, True Thomas! Fair is thy bed, and most fair thy bedfellow.

The Black Knight drew aback from him and was now come awake, wherefore he stood on his guard, but said nought. Then said the Red Knight: Sir Thomas, I have been asking this fair lady a question, but her memory faileth her and she may not answer it; perchance thou mayst do better. Tell me where and how many times hast thou bedded her betwixt last Tuesday and this? Nowhere and never, cried Sir Thomas, knitting his brows and handling his sword. Hah, said the Red Knight, an echo of her speech is this. Lo, the tale ye have made up betwixt you. But at least, having done mine errand, though meseemeth somewhat leisurely, and having gotten the woman for me, thou art now bringing her on to the Red Hold, whatever thou hast done with her on the road? I am

not, said my fellow, I am leading her away from the Red Hold. Pity of thee, quoth the other, that thou hast fallen in with me, and thou but half-armed. And he raised aloft his sword; but presently sank it again, and let the point rest on the earth.

Then he spoke again, not mockingly as erst: A word before we end it, Thomas: thou hast hitherto done well by me, as I by thee. I say thou hast gotten this woman, and I doubt not that at first thou hadst the mind to bring her to me unminished; but then thou wert overcome by her beauty, as forsooth I know thee woman-mad, and thou hadst meant to keep her for thyself, as forsooth I marvel not. But in thy love-making thou hast not bethought thee that keep her to thyself thou mayst not while I am above ground, save thou bewray me, and join thee to my foemen and thine. Because I am such a man, that what I desire that will I have. For this reason, when I misdoubted me of thee for thy much-tarrying, I cast the sleep over thee, and have caught thee. For what wilt thou do? Doubt it not, that if our swords meet, I shall pay thee for trying to take my bedthrall from me by taking from thee no more than thy life. But now will I forgive thee all if thou wilt ride home quietly with me and this damsel-errant to the Red Hold, and let her be mine and not thine so long as I will; and then afterwards, if thou wilt, she shall be thine as long as thou wilt. Now behold, both this chance and thy life is a mere gift of me to thee, for otherwise thou shalt have neither damsel nor life.

Yea, yea, said my friend, I know what thou wouldest: I have been no unhandy devil to thee this long while, and thou wouldst fain keep me still; but now I will be devil no longer, on this earth at least, but will die and take my luck of it. And do thou, God, see to the saving of this damsel, since thou hast taken the matter out of my hands. Farewell, dear maiden!

Scarce was the word out of his mouth ere his sword was in the air, and he smote so fierce and straight that he beat down the huge man's blade, and, ere he could master it again, smote the Red Knight so heavily on the crest that he fell to his knees; and the heart rose in me, for I deemed that he might yet prevail; and in as 'twere a flash I bethought me of the knife at my girdlestead, and drew it and ran to the Red Knight, and tore aside his mail hood with one hand and thrust the knife into his shoulder with the other; but so mighty was he that he heeded nought the hurt, but swept his sword back-handed at the Black Knight's unarmed leg, and smote him so sore a wound that down he fell clattering. Then arose the Red Knight, and thrust me from him with the left hand, and strode over my fellow-farer and thrust his sword through his throat. Then he turned to me, and spake in a braying voice as if a harsh horn were blown: Abide thou; if thou takest one step I will slay thee at once. So he went and sat down on a bank a little way from the dead man, and wiped his sword on the grass and laid it beside him, and so sat pondering a while. Thereafter he called me to him,

and bade me stand in face of him with my hands clasped before me. Then he spake to me: Thou art my thrall and my having, since I had thus doomed it no few days ago; and thou art now in my hands for me to do with as I will. Now instead of being meek and obedient to me thou hast rebelled against me, shot an arrow at me, run from me, denied answer to my questions, and thrust a knife into me. To be short, thou hast made thyself my foe. Furthermore, it is by thy doing that I have lost a right good servant and a trusty fellow, and one that I loved; it is thou that hast slain him. Now have I been pondering what I shall do with thee. I said: If I have deserved the death, then make an end and slay me presently; but bring me not to thine house, I pray thee. I pray by the mother that bore thee!

Quoth he: Hold thy peace, it is not what thou deservest that I am looking to, but what shall pleasure me. Now hearken; I say that thou hast made thee my foe, and I have overcome thee; thou art my runaway thrall, and I have caught thee. As my foe I might slay thee in any evil way it might like me; as my thrall I might well chastise thee as sharply and as bitterly as I would. But it is not my pleasure to slay thee, rather I will bring thee to the Red Hold, and there see what we may make of thee; whereas I cannot but deem that in thee is the making of somewhat more than a thrall; and if not, then a thrall must thou needs be. Again as to the chastising of thee, that also I forgive thee since I have gotten the hope aforesaid. Yet for-

sooth some shame must I do thee to pay thee back for the love that was betwixt thee and the slain man. I will ponder what it shall be; but take heed that whatsoever it shall be, it will not avail thee to pray me to forego it, though thy speech be as fair and sweet as thy body.

Therewith he was silent a while, and I stood there not daring to move, and my heart was so downcast that all the sweetness of life seemed departed. Yet I withheld lamentations or prayers, thinking within myself, who knows what occasion may be between this and the Red Hold for my escaping; let me keep myself alive for that if it may be.

Presently he arose and took his sword, and went up to the slain man's body and smote the head from off it. Then he went to the two horses of Sir Thomas and of me, and took from them such gear of girths and thongs as he would, and therewith he dight me as ye saw, doing a girth about my middle and making me fast to a line wherewith to hold me in tow. And then he did that other thing which sickens my very soul to tell of, to wit, that he took the slain man's head and tied a lace thereto, and hung it about my neck; and as he did so, he said: This jewel shalt thou thyself bear to mine house; and there belike shall we lay it in earth, since the man was my trusty fellow. Lo now, this is all the ill I shall do thee till it be tried of what avail thou art. This is a shaming to thee and not a torment, for I will ride a foot's-pace, and the green way is both soft and smooth; wherefore fear

not that I shall throw thee down or drag thee along. And to-morrow thy shame shall be gone and we shall see what is to betide.

Lo, friends, this is the last word he spake ere he was slain, and the ending of my tale; for we had gone thus but a little way ere ye brake out of the wood upon us; and then befell the death of one friend, and the doubt, maybe, of the others, and all the grief and sorrow that I shall never be quit of unless ye forgive me where I have done amiss, and help me in the days to come. And she spread out her hands before them, and bowed her head, and the tears fell from her eyes on to the floor.

Viridis wept at Birdalone's weeping, and Aurea for her own sorrow, which this other sorrow stirred. Atra wept not, but her face was sadder than weeping.

But Arthur spake and said: Herein hath been the hand of Weird, and hath been heavy on us; but no blame have we to lay on our sister Birdalone, nor hath she done light-mindedly by us; though maybe she erred in not trusting to the good-hap of the Quest to bring us back in due time: and all that she saith do we trow as if it were written in the Holy Gospel. They all yeasaid this, and called on her to come amongst them; but she thought of little at first save the joy of hearing the sweetness of those words as Arthur spake them; wherefore she hung back a little, and thought shame of it that she might not give more heed to the others of them. Then came Viridis and took her by the hand and led her to Sir Hugh, and Birdalone knelt

down before him and took his hand to kiss it, but he put both hands about her face and kissed her kindly and merrily on the lips. Then she knelt before Aurea, and was hapless before her; but Aurea kissed her, and bade her be of better cheer, albeit the words came coldly from her mouth. Next she came to Arthur, and knelt before him and took his hand and kissed it, and thanked him kindly for his kind words, looking into his face meanwhile; and she saw that it was pale and troubled now, and she longed to be alone with him that she might ask him wherefore.

As for Atra, she arose as Birdalone came before her, and cast her arms about her neck, and wept and sobbed upon her bosom, and then went hurrying from out the solar and into the hall, and walked to and fro there a while until the passion that tore her was lulled somewhat, and she might show her face to them calm and friendly once more. And as she entered Arthur was speaking, and he said:

To you, ladies, I tell what we of the castle wot better than well, that our dear friend hath escaped so heavy a fate in escaping the Red Hold, that it were unmeet for us to murmur at our loss in our fellow; for a warrior's life, which is ever in peril of death, is nought over heavy a ransom for such a friend, and so dear and lovely, from such a long and evil death. Whereas ye must wot that the said Hold hath this long while been a very treasure-house of woes and a coffer of lamentations; for merciless was the tyrant thereof, and merciless all his folk. Now another time, when ye are stronger

in heart than now ye be, I may tell you tales thereof closer and more nicely of those who did his will; as of his innermost band of men-at-arms, called the Millers; and of his fellow-worker in wizardry and venoms, called the Apothecary; and the three hags, called the Furies; and the three young women, called the Graces; and his hounds that love man's flesh; and the like tales, as evil as nightmares turned into deeds of the day. But now and here will I say this, that when we have done the obsequies of our dear fellow, it were good that we follow up the battle so valiantly begun by him. I mean that the Quest of our ladies being now accomplished, we should turn what is left of the fellowship into a war against the Red Hold and its evil things; and that so soon as the relics of Baudoin are laid in earth, we gather force and go thither in arms to live or die in the quarrel, and so sweeten the earth, as did the men of ancient days when they slew the dragons and the giants, and the children of hell, and the sons of Cain.

His cheek flushed as he spoke, and he looked around till his eyes fell on Birdalone, and he saw that her face also glowed and her eyes gleamed; but Viridis, her heart sank so that she paled, and her lips trembled.

But Aurea spake and said: I thank thee for thy word, Black Squire, and I know that my man shall rejoice in Paradise when he knoweth of it, and thereof shall I tell him to-morrow when the mass is said for him.

And Atra said: Good is the word, and we look

to it that the deed shall be better yet. Thus hath the evil arisen that shall destroy the evil, as oft hath been when the valiant have been grieved, and the joy of the true-hearted hath been stolen from them; then the hand doth the doughty deed and the heart hath ease, and solaced is sorrow.

They looked on her and wondered, for she spake with her head upraised and her eyes glittering, as she had been one of the wise women of yore agone. And Birdalone feared her, though she loved her.

Lastly spake Hugh, and said: Brother, this is well thought of indeed, and I marvel that I did not prevent thee; and I am thine to live and die with thee. And the adventure is nought unlikely; for if we have lost a captain they have lost their head devil, and their head little devil; moreover, the good men of Greenford shall join them to us, and that shall make us strong, whereas they have men enough, and those stout men-at-arms; and artificers they have to make us engines, and do other wisdom; and therewithal money to buy or to wage what they will. Wherefore, to my mind, we were best to make no tarrying, but send out the messengers for the hosting straightway.

Straightway, said the Black Squire; and let us go now and find Sir Aymeris. So they arose both and went their ways, and left the women there alone, and were gone a good while.

CHAPTER VIII. ATRA AND BIRDALONE TALK TOGETHER WHILE THE LORDS SIT AT THE MURDER-COUNCIL.

MEANWHILE of their absence, Viridis sat sad and silent and downcast, though she wept not, for her gladness, which erst had been so great, seemed now reft from her; and no merrier was Aurea, as might have been looked for. But Atra came quietly unto Birdalone, and said softly: I have a word for thee if thou wilt come forth with me into the hall. Birdalone's heart failed her somewhat, but she suffered Atra to take her hand, and they went into the hall together, and Atra brought her into a shot-window, and they sat down together side by side and were silent awhile. Spake Atra then, trembling and reddening: Birdalone, knowest thou what thought, what hope, was in my heart when I spake so proudly and rashly e'en now? Birdalone kept silence, and trembled as the other did. This it was, said Atra: he will go to this battle valiantly, he may fall there, and that were better; for then is life to begin anew: and what is there to do with these dregs of life? Said Birdalone, with flushed face: If he die he shall die goodly, and if he live he shall live goodly. Yea, yea, said Atra; forsooth thou art a happy woman! Dost thou hate me? said Birdalone. Said Atra: Proud is thy word, but I hate thee not. Nay, e'en now, when I spake thus boastfully, I thought: When he hath died as a doughty knight should, then,

when life begins again, Birdalone and I shall be friends and sisters, and we two will talk together oft and call him to mind, and the kindness of him, and how he loved us. Woe's me! that was when he was there sitting beside me and I could see him and his kindness; and then it was as if I could give him away; but now he is gone and I may not see him, it is clear to me that I have no part or lot in him, and I call back my thought and my word, and now it is: O that he may live! O thou happy woman, that shall be glad whether he liveth or dieth!

Said Birdalone: And now thou hatest me, dost thou not, and we are foes? Atra answered not, nor spake for a while; then she said: Hard and bitter is it, and I know not what to turn to. I have seen once and again, on the wall of the Minorites' church at Greenford, a fair picture of the Blessed, and they walking in the meads of Paradise, clad in like raiment, men and women; their heads flower-crowned, their feet naked in the harmless blossomed grass; hand in hand they walk, with all wrath passed for ever, all desire changed into loving-kindness, all the anguish of forgiveness forgotten. And underneath the picture is it writ:

Bitter winter, burning summer, never more shall waste and wear;
Blossom of the rose undying brings undying springtide there.

O for the hope of it, that I might hope it! O for the days to be and the assuaging of sorrow: I speak the word, and the hope springeth; the word is spoken, and there abideth desire barren of hope!

And she bowed down her head and wept bitterly; and Birdalone called to mind her kindness of the past and wept for her, she also.

After a while Atra lifted up her head, and thus she spake: I hate thee not, Birdalone; nor doth one say such things to a foe. Yea, furthermore, I will crave somewhat of thee. If ever there come a time when thou mayst do something for me, thou wilt know it belike without my telling thee. In that day and in that hour I bid thee remember how we stood together erst at the stair-foot of the Wailing Tower in the Isle of Increase Unsought, and thou naked and fearful and quaking, and what I did to thee that tide to comfort thee and help and save thee. And then when thou hast called it to mind, do thou for me what thou canst do. Wilt thou promise this? Yea, yea, said Birdalone; and with all the better will, that oft and over again have I called it to mind. Wherefore I behight thee to let me serve thee if I may whenso the occasion cometh, even if it be to my own pain and grief; for this I know thou meanest.

See thou to this then, said Atra coldly; and thou shalt be the better for it in the long run belike: for thou art a happy woman.

She arose as she spake, and said: Hist! here come the lords from the murder-council; and lo, now that he cometh, my heart groweth evil toward thee again, and well-nigh biddeth me wish that thou wert naked and helpless before me again. Lo my unhap! that he should mark my face that it shows as if I were fain to do thee a mischief. And nought

of that would I do; for how should it avail me, and thou my fellow and the faithful messenger of the Quest?

Now little of her last words did Birdalone meet, as into the hall came Hugh and Arthur; and though she strove to sober her mind and think of her she-friend and her unhappiness, yet she could not choose but to be full of joy in her inmost heart now she knew without doubt that she was so well-beloved of her beloved: and she deemed that Atra was in the right indeed to call her a happy woman.

So now they all went into the solar together, and sat them down with the two others; and Hugh did them to wit, how they had ordered all the matter of the messengers who were to summon the knights and chiefs of thereabouts, and the aldermen of Greenford, to meet at the Castle of the Quest, that they might set afoot the hosting to go against the Red Hold.

CHAPTER IX. HUGH TELLS THE STORY OF THE QUEST'S ENDING.

WHEN this was said, and there had been silence a while, Birdalone took up the word, and spake meekly and sweetly, saying: Dear friends, how it fared with you on the isle from the time of my leaving you, and how with you, true knights, from the time of your departure, I both were fain to know for the tale's sake, and also I would take the telling thereof as a sign of your forgiveness of my transgression; so I would crave the same of you but if it weary you overmuch.

All they yeasaid her kindly, and Hugh spake and said: By your leave, fellows, I will tell in few words what betid us on our way to the Isle of Increase Unsought, and then shall Viridis take up the tale from the time that Birdalone left the said isle in the witch's ferry. None said aught against it, and Hugh went on: Short is my tale of the journey: We came to the Isle of Nothing on the morrow's morn of our departure, and being warned of thee, Birdalone, we abode there but a little while to rest us from the boat, and went nowhither from the strand, and so went on our way in a three hours' space.

Thence again we took the water, and came to the Isle of Kings, and that was in the middle of the night: we beheld the dead long and heedfully when the morning came, and departed again before noon, and came to the Isle of Queens a little after nightfall. The next morning we deemed we needs must

go see the images of those ladies, lest aught might have befell since thou wert there which might be of import to the Quest, but all was unchanged, and we came away while the day was yet young.

We made the Isle of the Young and the Old about sunset that day, and the boy and the girl came down to the strand to behold us and wonder at us, and we sported with them merrily a while; and then they brought us to the house of the old man, who received us courteously and gave us to eat and drink. Forsooth, when the night was somewhat spent, he brought out strong drink to us, and took it somewhat amiss that we drank not overmuch thereof, as forsooth he did, and so fell asleep. Before he was drunk we asked him many questions about the isle and its customs, but he knew nought to tell us of them. Of thee also we asked, sister, but he had no memory of thee.

On the morrow he fared down with us to our ferry, and made many prayers to us to take him along with us; for here, said he, is neither lordship nor fair lady; and if here I abide, soon shall I come to mine ending day, and sore I yearn for joyance and a long term to my years. Now we durst not take him aboard lest we should fare amiss with the wight of the Sending Boat; so we naysaid him courteously, thanked him for his guesting, and gave him gifts, to wit, a finger gold ring and an ouch of gold, so he turned away from us somewhat downcast as we deemed; but ere we had given the word to the Sending Boat we heard him singing merrily in a high cracked voice as he went on his way.

Now on this last day betid somewhat of new tidings; for scarce was this isle out of sight behind, ere we saw a boat come sailing toward us from the north-east, and it came on swiftly with a blue ripple of the lake behind it. Thereat we marvelled, and yet more when we saw that its sail was striped of gold and green and black; next then were we betwixt fear and joy when, as it drew nigher, we saw three women in the said boat, clad in gold, green, and black; and it came so nigh unto us at last, that we could see their faces that they were verily those of our lovelings; and each reached out her arms to us and called on us for help, each by our name: and there we were, oarless, sailless, at the mercy of our unkenned ferry. Then would Baudoin and I have leapt overboard to swim to our loves at all adventure; but Sir Arthur here stayed us, and bade us think of it, that we were now nearing the Witch-land, and if we might not look to be beset with guiles and gins to keep us from winning to our journey's end; wherefore we forbore, though in all wretchedness, and the gay boat ran down the wind away from us, and the breeze and the ripple passed away with it, and the lake lay under the hot sun as smooth as glass; and on we went, weary-hearted.

Came again another sail out of the north-east, when the sun was getting low, and speedily it drew nigh, but this time it was no small boat or barge, but a tall ship with great sails, and goodly-towered she was and shield-hung, and the basnets gleamed and the spears glittered from her castle-tops and

bulwarks, and the sound of her horns came down the wind as she neared us. We two handled our weapons and did on our basnets, but Arthur there, he sat still, and said: Not over-wise is the witch, that she lets loose on us two sendings in one day so like unto each other. Hah, said Baudoin, be we wary though; they are going to shoot. And sure enough we saw a line of bowmen in all the castles and even along, and a horn blew, and then forth flew the shafts, but whither we knew not, for none came anywhere anigh us; and Arthur laughed and said: A fair shot into the clouds; but, by our Lady! if none shot better in our country, I would bear no armour for their shafts. But we two were confused and knew not what to think.

The great ship flew past us on the wind as the barge had done, but when she was about half a mile aloof we saw her canvass fall to shivering and her yards swaying round, and Arthur cried out: St. Nicholas! the play beginneth again! she is coming about!

Even so it was, and presently she was bearing on us, and was ere long so close aboard that we could see her every spar and rope, and her folk all gathered to the windward, knights, sergeants, archers, and mariners, to gaze at us and mock us; and huge and devilish laughter arose from amongst them as she ploughed the water so close beside us, that one might well-nigh have cast a morsel of bread aboard her; for clear it was presently that she had no mind to run us down.

Spake Arthur then: There will be a fresh play

presently, my mates, but ye sit fast, for meseemeth this show is no more perilous than the other, though it be bigger.

Scarce were the words out of his mouth, ere there was a stir amongst the men gathered in the waist, and lo, amidst a knot of big and fierce mariners, three women standing, pale, with flying hair, and their hands bound behind them, and one was clad in gold and another in green and the third in black; and their faces were as the faces of Aurea and Viridis and Atra.

Then there came forth from that ship a huge cruel roar blent with mocking laughter that shamed our very hearts, and those evil things in the form of mariners took hold of each one of the ladies and cast them overboard into the gulf of the waters, first Aurea, next Viridis, and then Atra; and we two stood up with our useless swords brandished and would have leapt over into the deep, but that Arthur arose also and took hold of an arm of each of us and stayed us, and said: Nay, then, if ye go, take me with you, and let all the Quest sink down into the deep, and let our lovelings pine in captivity, and Birdalone lose all her friends in one swoop, and we be known hereafter as the fools of lovers, the unstable.

So we sat us down, but huge shrieking laughter rose up unblended from the keel of the evil thing, and then they let her go down the wind, and she went her way with flashing of arms, and streaming of banners and pennons, and blowing of horns, and the sun was setting over the wide water.

But Arthur spake: Cheer up, brethren! see ye not how this proud witch is also but an eyeless fool to send us such a show, and the second time in one day to show us the images of our dearlings, who hours ago flitted past us in the stripe-sailed boat? Where, then, did they of the ship meet with them? Nay, lords, let not the anguish of love steal all your wits.

We saw we had been fools to be so overcast by guile, and yet were we exceeding ill at ease, and over-long the time seemed unto us until we should be come to the Isle of Increase Unsought, and find our lovelings there.

Now was the night come, and we fell asleep, but belike were not often all asleep at once; and at last it was, when we felt the dawn drawing near, though, the moon being down, it was the darkest of the summer night, that we were all three awake, when all of a sudden we heard just astern the rushing of the water, as though some keel were cleaving it, and dimly in the dark we saw a sail as of a boat overhauling us. Close at hand there rang out a lamentable cry: O, are ye there, fellows of the Quest? O, help me, friends! save me and deliver me, who am snatched away to be cast into the hands of my mistress that was. Help me, Baudoin, Hugh, Arthur! Help! help!

Then all we knew the voice of Birdalone, and Arthur leapt up, and would have been overboard in a trice had not we two held him, and he fought and cursed us well-favouredly, there is no nay thereto; and meanwhile the wailing voice of thee,

my sister, died out in the distance, and the east grew grey, and dawn was come.

Then spake Baudoin: Arthur, my brother, dost thou not mark that this also was of the same sort of show as those two others, and thou who wert so wise before? It is but beguilings to bring the Quest to nought; wherefore call to mind thy manhood and thy much wisdom!

And we admonished him and rebuked him till he became quiet and wise again, but was sad and downcast and silent. But the Sending Boat sped on through the dawning, and when it was light we saw that we had the Isle of Increase close aboard, and we ran ashore there just as the sun was rising. Fain were we then to get out of the boat and feel earth under our feet. We took all our hards out of the boat, and hid away under the roots of an old thorn a little mail wherein was your raiment, my ladies, which ye had lent to Birdalone; then we did on our armour, and advised us of whereabout on the isle we were, and we saw the orchards and gardens before us, and the great fair house above all, even as ye told us of them, Birdalone.

Next, then, without more ado, we went our ways up through the orchard and the gardens, and when we were well-nigh at the end of them, and in face of those many steps ye spake of, we saw at the foot of them a tall woman clad in red scarlet, standing as if she abode our coming. When we drew nigh we saw that she was strong-looking, well-knit, white-skinned, yellow-haired, and blue-eyed, and might have been called a fair woman, as to her

shaping, save that her face was heavy, yet hard-looking, with thin lips and somewhat flagging cheeks, a face stupid, but proud and cruel.

She hailed us as we came up, and said: Men-at-arms, ye be welcome to our house, and I bid you to eat and drink and abide here.

Then we louted before her, and bade her Hail; and Baudoin said: Lady, thy bidding will we take; yet have we an errand to declare ere we break bread with thee, lest when it is told we be not so welcome as ye tell us now. What is it? said she. Said Baudoin: This man here is called the Green Knight, and this the Black Squire, and I am the Golden Knight; and now will we ask thee if this isle be called the Isle of Increase Unsought? Even so have I called it, quoth she, wherefore I deem none other will dare call it otherwise. It is well, quoth Baudoin; but we have heard say that hereto had strayed three dear friends of ours, three maidens, who hight Viridis, the friend of the Green Knight, and Atra, who is the Black Squire's, and Aurea, who is mine own friend, so we have come to take them home with us, since they have been so long away from their land and their loves. Now if they be thy friends thou wilt perchance let them go for love's sake and the eking of friendship; but if they be thy captives, then are we well willing to pay thee ransom, not according to their worth, for no treasure heaped up might come nigh it, but according to thy desire, lady.

Laughed the proud lady scornfully and said: Big are thy words, Sir Knight: if I had these

maidens in my keeping I would give them unto you for nothing, and deem that I had the best of the bargain. But here are they not. True it is that I had here three thralls who were hight as thou hast said; but a while ago, not many days, they transgressed against me till I chastised them; and then was I weary of them and would be quit of them; for I need no servants here, whereas I myself am enough for myself. Wherefore I sent them away across the water to my sister, who dwells in a fair place hight the House under the Wood; for she needeth servants, because the earth there yieldeth nought save to the tiller and the herdsman and the hunter, while here all cometh unsought. With her may ye deal, for what I know, and buy the maidens whom ye prize so high; though belike ye may have to give her other servants in their place. For, indeed, a while ago her thrall fled from her and left her half undone, and it is said that she came hither in her shamelessness: but I know not; if she did, she slipped through my fingers, or else I would have made her rue her impudence. Now meseemeth, Sir Knights, here is enough of so small and foolish a matter; and again I pray you to enter my poor house, and take meat and drink along with me, for ye be none the less welcome because of your errand, though it be a foolish one.

Now would Sir Baudoin have answered wrathfully, but Arthur plucked at his skirt, and he yeasaid the lady's bidding, though somewhat ungraciously; but that she heeded nought; she took Sir Baudoin by the hand and led him up the stately

perron, and thence came we into a pillared hall, as fair as might be. And there on the dais was a table dight with dainty meats and drinks, and the lady bade us thereto, and we sat to it.

Thereat was the lady buxom and merry: Baudoin scowled across the board; I was wary and silent; but Arthur was as blithe with the lady as she with him; nor did I altogether marvel thereat, since I knew him wise of wit.

But when we were done with the meal, the lady stood up and said: Now, Sir Knights, I will give you leave; but this house is as your own to roam through all its chambers and pleasure you with its wonders and goodliness; and when ye are weary of the house, then is the orchard and the garden free to you, and all the isle wheresoever ye will go. And here in this hall is meat and drink for you whenso ye will; but if ye would see me again to-day, then shall ye meet me where ye first happened on me e'en now, at the foot of the great perron.

Then she laid her hand on Arthur's shoulder, and said: Thy big friend may search out every nook in this house, and every bush in the whole island, and if he find there the maidens he spake of, one or all of them, then are they a gift from me unto him.

Therewith she turned, and went out of the hall by a door in the side thereof; and now already meseemed that though the woman was hateful and thick-hearted and cruel, yet she was become fairer, or seemed so, than when we first came on her;

and for my part I pondered on what it might grow to, and fear of her came into my soul.

Now spake Baudoin: Fellows, let us get out into the garden at least; for this place is evil, and meseems it smells and tastes of tears and blood, and that evil wights that hate the life of men are lurking in the nooks thereof. And lo, our very she-friend that was so kind and simple and dainty with us, there is, as it were, the image of the dear maiden standing trembling and naked before the stupid malice of this lump of flesh. So spake he, Birdalone.

But I said to Arthur in a soft voice: And when shall we slay her? Said he: Not until we have gotten from her all that may be gotten; and that is the living bodies of our friends. But come we forth.

So did we, and came down to the orchard and did off our helms, and lay down under a big apple-tree which was clear of cover all round about, and so fell to our redes; and I asked Arthur what he deemed of the story of our loves having been carried to the House under the Wood, and if it might not be tried seeking thither; but he laughed and said: Never would she have told us thereof had it been sooth: doubtless our friends are here on this isle, but, as I deem, not in the house, else had not the witch left all the house free for us to search into. Yea, said I, but how if they be in her prison? Said he: It is not hard to find out which is the prison of so dainty a house as is yonder; and when we had found it, soon should we have hit upon a

way to break it, since we be three, and stout fellows enough. Nay, I deem that the lovelings be stowed away in some corner of the isle without the house, and that mayhappen we shall find them there; and yet I trow not before we have made guile meet guile, and overcome the sorceress. But come now, let us be doing, and begin to quarter this little land as the kestrel doth the water-meadow; and leave we our armour, lest we weary us, for we shall have no need for hard strokes.

We hung up there on the tree helm and shield and hauberk, and all our defences, and went our ways quartering the isle; and the work was toilsome, but we rested not till the time was come to keep tryst with the lady; and all that while we found no sign of the darling ones: and the isle was everywhere a meadow as fair as a garden, with little copses of sweet-growing trees here and there, and goodly brooks of water, but no tillage anywhere: wild things, as hart and buck and roe, we came upon, and smaller deer withal, but all unhurtful to man; but of herding was no token.

Came we then back to that lordly perron, and there, at the foot thereof, stood the witch-wife, and received us joyously; clad was she all gloriously in red scarlet broidered and begemmed; her arms bare and her feet sandalled, and her yellow hair hanging down from under its garland; and certainly it was so that she had grown fairer, and was sleek and white and well-shapen, and well-haired; yet by all that, the visage of her was little bettered, and unto me she was loathsome.

Now the feast went much as the earlier meal had done; and Baudoin was surly and Arthur blithe and buxom; and nought befell to tell of, save that dishes and meats, and flasks and cups, and all things came upon the board as if they were borne thereon by folk unseen; and thereat we wondered not much, considering in what wonder-house we were. But the lady-witch looked on us and smiled, and said: Knights, ye marvel at the manner of our service, but call to mind that we told you this morning that we were enough for Ourselves, and we have so dight our days here that whoso is our friend on this Isle of Increase shall lack nothing. Fear not, therefore, to see aught ugly in our servants as now unseen, if their shapes were made manifest unto you.

All things were we heedful to note at this banquet; but when it was over, then came music into the hall from folk unseen, but not as if the musicians were a many, only belike some three or four. And thereat the lady spake, saying: Knights, ye may deem our minstrels but few, but such is our mind that we love not our music overloud, and for the most part only three sing or play unto us at one time.

Thereafter the lady brought us to fair chambers, and we slept there in all ease, and we arose on the morrow and found the lady still blithe with us; yet I noted this, that she seemed to deal with Arthur as if she saw him now for the first time, and much he seemed to be to her liking.

Again we fared forth, and were no less diligent

in searching the isle than erst, and found nought; and all went that day as before.

On the morrow (that is, the third day) the witch seemed to have somewhat more memory of Arthur than erst, and even yet more liking of him, so that she reached out her hand for him to kiss, which needs must he do, despite his loathing of her.

When we had lain under the apple-tree a little while, Baudoin spake and said: Yesterday and the day before we searched the open land and found nought; now to-day let us search the house, and if we find nought, then at least it shall lie behind us. We yeasaid it, and presently went back, and from chamber to chamber, and all was fair and goodly as might be, and we marvelled what would betide to it when the witch was undone and her sorcery come to an end.

To the Wailing Tower we came, and up the stairs, and found the door open of the prison-chamber, and all there as thou hast told us, Birdalone; only we opened the great coffer, whence thou didst refrain thee, and found it full of hideous gear truly, as fetters and chains, and whips and rods, and evil tools of the tormentors, and cursed it all and came away; and Arthur said: Lo you, this stupid one! How eager is she to bid us what to do, and to tell us that our ladies are not in this evil house, since she leaveth all open to us. Yet we went about the house without, and counted the windows heedfully to see that we had missed no chamber, and found nought amiss; and then we went in again and sought as low down as we might,

to see if perchance some dungeon there were underground, but found nought save a very goodly undercroft below the great hall, which was little less fair than that which was above it. So came the evening and the banquet, and the end of that day; but the witch-wife led Arthur by the hand to the board, and afterwards to the chamber ere we slept.

On the fourth day and the fifth it was no otherwise than erst; and when I fared to bed I felt confused in my head and sick of heart.

The night of the next day (the sixth), as we went to our chambers, and the witch-wife and Arthur hand-in-hand, she stayed him a while, and spake eagerly to him in a soft voice; and as he came up to me afterwards he said: To-night I have escaped it, but there will not be escape for long. From what? said I. He said: From bedding her; for now it has come to this, that presently we must slay her at once and have no knowledge of our sweetlings, or I must do her will.

In such wise passed four more days, and it was the twelfth morning of our sojourn there, and we went forth on our search of every mead and every covert of the isle, and all day we found nought to our purpose; but as it grew toward sunset, and there grew great clouds in the eastern ort, piled up and copper-coloured, we came over a bent on to a little green dale watered by a clear brook, and as we looked down into it we saw something shine amongst its trees; so we hastened toward that gleam, and lo, amidst the dale, with the brook running through it, a strange garth we saw. For

there was a pavilion done of timber and board, and gaily painted and gilded, and out from that house was, as it were, a great cage of thin gilded bars, both walls and roof, just so wide apart as no one full-grown, carl or quean, could thrust through.

Thitherward then ran we, shouting, for we saw at once that in the said cage were three women whose aspect was that of our sweetlings, and presently we were standing by the said herse, reaching our hands out to them to come to us and tell us their tale, and that we would deliver them. But they stood together in the midst of the said cage, and though they gazed piteously on us thence, and reached out their hands to us, they neither spake nor came to the herse to us; so we deemed that they were bewitched, and our joy was dashed.

Then we went all about the cage and the pavilion to find ingate, and found it not; and then the three of us together strove with the bars of the herse, and shook and swayed them, but it was all to no purpose.

Moreover, while we were at this work the sun seemed to go out, and there came a heavy black mist rolling into the dale, and wrapped us about so that we saw not each other's faces, and the bars of the herse were gone from our hands as we stood there. Then came rain and thunder and lightning on to the black night, and by the glare of the lightning we could see the leaves and grass of the dale, but neither herse nor house nor woman. So we abode there in the dark night, and the storm all bewildered us, till the rain and clouds drew off

and it was calm fair starlight again, but clean gone was the golden cage and they that stood therein; and we turned sadly, and went our ways toward the witch-house.

On the way said Arthur: Brethren, this meseemeth is but a-going on with the shows which were played us on the water as we came hither; but whether she doth this but for to mock and torment us, or that she would beguile us into deeming that our friends are verily here, I wot not; but to-morrow, meseemeth, I shall can to tell you.

Now came we to the perron of the house, and there stood the witch-wife under the stars to meet us. And when she saw us, she took hold of Arthur by the hand and the arm to caress him, and found that he and we were drenched with the rain and the storm, as might well be deemed; then she bade us up to our chambers to do on raiment which she had dight for us, and we went thither, and found our garments rich and dainty indeed; but when we came down into the hall where the witch abode us, we saw that Arthur's raiment was far the richest and daintiest. But the witch ran to him and cast her arms about him, and clipped and kissed him before the others, and he suffered it. So sped the feast again.

But when they went to bed, the said witch took Arthur's hand and spake a word unto him, and led him away, and he went with her as one nought loth; but we twain were afraid lest she should destroy him when she had had her will of him.

Wherefore we waked through the more part of the night with our swords ready to hand.

But when we were clad in the morn he came unto us, he also clad, and was downcast and shamefaced indeed, but safe and sound; and he said: Speak no word about our matter till we be out in the open air, for I fear all things about us.

So when we had gone forth and were under the apple-tree once more, spake Arthur: Now, lords, am I shamed for ever, for I have become the leman of this evil creature; but I pray ye not to mock me; and that the more as the same lot may happen on you both, or either; for I can see for sure that the wretch will weary of me and desire one of you two. Let it pass. Somewhat have I found out from her, but not much; first, that she has forgotten her first lie, to wit, how she sent our ladies to the sister-witch; for I told her of the golden cage, and how we had missed it in the storm; and she said: Though I deem it a folly that ye should seek these thralls, yet would I help you if I might, since ye are now become my dear friends. Though, forsooth, when ye meet them I deem that ye will find them sore changed to you. For, as I told you, they fled away from me, after I had chastised them for a treason, into the hidden places of the isle, whereas they had no keel to sail away hence. And I cared not to follow them, as I myself am queen and lady of all things here, and am enough for myself, save when love constraineth me, dear lord. Now, my rede is that ye seek the golden cage again and yet again, because I deem that

these thralls have somehow learned some wisdom, and they have enchanted the said cage for a defence against me, from whom they might not hide as they did from you; for of me have they stolen their wizardry, and I am their mistress therein.

This, therefore, is the new lie of her, and my rede is that we heed it nought. For my mind is that she it is that hath made the appearance of the cage and the women therein, and that she hath our poor friends somewhere underneath her hand.

Now this we deemed most like; yet whereas we had nought to do with the time, which, now that we had searched the isle throughly, hung heavy on hand, we deemed it good to go to the dale of the golden cage again, though we looked not to find the cage there any more. But this betid, that we found the little dale easily enough, and there stood the cage as we had seen it yesterday, but nought was there within its bright bars save the grass and the flowers, and the water of the brook a-running.

We loitered about that place a while, and went back to the house in due time; and to shorten the tale, I shall tell that for many days it betid that we went every day to seek the golden cage, but after the first three days we saw it no more.

Now began sadness and weariness to overcome us as the days and weeks wore, and belike the witch-wife noted it that we were worse company than heretofore.

And now on a day Arthur bade us note that the said witch was growing weary of him, and he bade me look to it; for, said he, she is turning her

face toward thee, brother. My heart burned with rage at that word; I said nought, but made up my mind that I would try to bring the matter to an end.

That same night befell what Arthur had threatened; for the feast being done in the evening, the witch drew me aside while the music was a-playing, and caressed my hand and my shoulder, and said: I am yet wondering at you Champions, that ye must needs follow after those three wretched thralls, whom never will ye find, for they need ye not, but will flee from you if ye have sight of them, as they did that other day; and therein they are scarce in the wrong, whereas they may well think that if ye find them they should fall into my hands; for easily may I take them any day that I will, and then I have a case against them, and may lawfully chastise them according to the law that has been given unto me; and then shall they be in grievous plight. Wherefore the rede We give unto you three now is the rede of friendliness that ye make yourselves happy in Our Island, and then will We do everything We may for your pleasure and delight; and if ye will that We make Ourselves even fairer than now We be, that may be done, and shall be a reward unto you for your yielding and obedience. And if ye will women thralls for your pleasure, that also may be gotten for you; for We be not wholly without power in these waters, though We have no keel or ferry upon them. And now, thou fair lad, We give thee this last word: Ye Champions have been dwelling in Our house

a long while, and that while have ever striven to thwart Us. We now counsel you to make an end of it, and it shall be better for you.

She seemed to my eyes prouder and stupider than ever erst, despite her golden hair and white skin and lovely limbs; and I said to myself that now must we destroy the evil of that house even if we died for it, or else we were all undone; withal I saw somewhat of truth thrusting up through her much lying, and I deemed, even as Arthur did, that she had our friends under her hand somewhere.

Nought else betid that night; but on the morrow we went forth and strayed on till we were come into the southernmost quarter of the isle, and not very far from the water we came upon a wood or big thicket which was new to us. So we entered it, and as we went and noted the wild things of the wood going hither and thither, we espied afar off the shape of a man going amidst the thicket; wherefore we went warily towards him, lest he should see us and flee from us; and when we drew a little nigher we saw it was a woman, though she was clad as a hunter, with legs naked to above the knee. She had a quiver at her back and a bow in her hand, and her coat was black of hue. Belike now she heard our going amongst the dry leaves, for she turned her face to us, and lo! it was the face of Atra.

When she saw us, she gave a shrill cry, and fell to running at her swiftest away from us, and we followed all we might, but we could not over-run

her, though we kept her in sight ever, till we had run all through the wood, and before us was the sheer side of a rocky hill and the mouth of a cave therein, and by the said mouth who should there be but Aurea and Viridis, as we thought, clad in gold and in green, but the fashion of their raiment not otherwise than Atra's. Their bows were bended and they had shafts in their hands, and as we came out of the thicket into the open lawn before the cave, Viridis nocked a shaft and aimed at us and drew, and the shaft flew over my head; therewith mocking laughter came from them, and they ran into the cave. Speedily we ran up to it, but when we came home thither, there was the sheer hill-side, but never a cave nor an opening.

Dismayed were we thereat; but more dismayed had we been but that we deemed that all this was but a cheat and a painted show put upon us by the witch to back up her lying. Nevertheless we fared the next day to seek the wood and the cave in the sheer rock, but nowise might we find either wood or cave.

Now it was the night of the day hereafter, as we went to our chambers, that the witch-wife took me by the hand and led me apart, and said me many soft things of her accursed lust, whereof I will not say one again. But the upshot of it all was that she would bring me to her chamber and her bed. And whereas I was determined what to do, and had my war-sword by my side, I naysaid her not, but made her good countenance. And when we came to her chamber, which was full gloriously dight,

and fragrant as with the scent of the roses and lilies of mid-June, she bade me to lie in her bed of gold and ivory and she would be with me anon. So I unclad myself and laid me down, but I drew forth my sword, and laid the ancient naked blade betwixt my side and her place.

Anon she cometh back again unclad, and would step into the bed; but she saw the sword and said: What is this, Champion? Said I: These edges are the token of sundering between us, for there is a spell on me, that with no woman may I deal, save with mine only love, but I shall do her mortal scathe; so beware by the token of the grey edges of battle. She drew aback, and was as a spiteful and angry cat, and there was no loveliness in her; and she said: Thou liest, and thou hatest me; see thou to it, both for thyself and thy loveling. And she turned about and strode out of the chamber; but I arose and clad myself in haste, and took my naked sword in my hand. But before I went, I looked around, and espied an ambry fashioned in the wall of the bed-lane, and the door was half open; and the said ambry was wrought of the daintiest, all of gold and pearl and gems; and I said to myself: Herein is some treasure, and this is a tide of war. So I opened the ambry, and within it was even more gloriously wrought than without; and there was nought therein, save a little flask of crystal done about with bands of gold set with great and goodly gems. So I took the said flask and went my ways hastily to my own chamber, and there I looked at the said flask and took out the stopple; and there

was a liquor therein, white like to water, but of a spicy smell, sweet, fresh, and enheartening. So I yet thought this was some great treasure, and that much hung upon it, could I find out unto what use it might be put. And I said: To-morrow we will put it to the proof. Then I put the said flask under my pillow, and laid my sword by my side and slept, and was not ill-content so far.

But on the morrow, when I met my fellows, they asked me how I had sped, and I told them, Well, and that we would talk the matter over under our tree of counsel. So we went down into the hall, where we met the witch-lady; and I looked for it that she would be angry and fierce with me; but it went far otherwise; for she was blithe and buxom, and abounding in endearments more than I could away with. But this I noted, that her eyes wandered, and her speech faltered at whiles, and ever she seemed to be seeking somewhat; and withal that her caressing hands were seeking if they could aught stowed away in the bosom of my coat. But all was nought, for as we came to the door of the hall I gave Baudoin the flask to guard until we should come to our apple-tree of rede. Wherefore the she-wolf went red and white by turns, and fumed, and fretted her bedizenments with unrestful hands, and when she should let us go our ways, she lingered and looked back oft, and was loth to depart ere she had gotten what she lacked, and that, forsooth, was the said flasket.

But when we were without the house, I bade our fellows go with me to another place than the

wonted apple-tree of rede, and they understood my word, and I led them to a little grassy plain without the orchard, where was no covert for a wide space about it, nought but the one linden-tree under which now we sat. There I told them all the tale of the last night and of the flasket, and put before them all that was in my mind to do that evening at the banquet, and they both of them yeasaid it. But what it was, that shall ye hear anon when we carried the matter through; but I bade Baudoin still carry the flasket till the evening.

Thereafter we spake of other matters; but soon we had good cause to rejoice that we had not talked our talk under the apple-tree (whereas I doubted not that the witch would spy upon us there), for not long had we been at our talk ere, looking that way, we saw the evil creature by the hedge of the orchard and gazing over at us.

We arose then, and came to her as if nought had happened; and she bade us walk the garden with her, and we yeasaid it, and went with her, and paced about amidst the flowers and lay on the blossomed grass. Forsooth, both to her and to us the time hung heavy on hand. And meseemed that the sleekness and fairness of her body was worsened since yesterday, and she was pale and haggard, and her eyes were wandering and afraid.

Now she bade us come a little further into the garden and eat a morsel at noon; and we arose, and she brought us to where were vines trellised all about and overhead, so that it was like a fair

green cloister; and there was a board laid and spread with many dainties of meat and drink. And she bade us sit. Verily we had but little stomach to that dinner; and I said to myself, Poison! poison! and even so my fellows deemed, as afterwards they told me. And I saw Baudoin loosen his sword in the sheath, and I knew that his mind was to smite at once if he saw aught amiss. And I, who sat next to the witch, laid my hand on a little dagger which I wore at my girdle. She also saw this, and turned as pale as death, and sat trembling before us; and whatso we ate or drank at that board under the rustling vine-leaves, she gave unto us with her own hand; and then we wotted full surely that she had meant our deaths there and then, but was cowed by the fierce eyes of Baudoin and the threat of my hand.

Withal it seemed that she might not bear it to sit there long amongst us. She rose up and smiled on us as ghastly as a corpse, and gave us leave, and went hurrying into the house. And right glad we were to be at rest from her. Yet as we ourselves durst not go far away from the house, lest some new thing might happen, neither could she leave us quite alone, but thrice again that afternoon at some turn of the garden, or orchard, or meadow, we came upon her wan face and eyes full of all hate and staring pride, and she enforced her to smile upon us, and turned away with some idle word.

At last the sun began to sink, and we went to the perron of the house, and found her standing to

meet us in her wonted way. But when we came up she gave no hand to any one of us, but went up the stairs before us, and we followed with no word spoken.

There was the hall with the lordly service on the board, and the wax-candles lighted all about, and the great vault of stone fair and stately over it. We went to the dais and the board and sat down, the witch-wife in her gold and ivory chair at the board's end, and I at her right hand and looking down the hall, my two fellows facing me, with their backs to the clear of the hall.

There we sat, and the meats and drinks were before us as dainty as ever erst; but we put forth no hand to them, but sat staring at each other for some two minutes it might be, and the witch looked from one to the other of us, and quaked that her hands shook like palsy.

Then I rose up and put my hand to my bosom (for Baudoin had given me the flasket ere we came to the perron): I spake in a loud voice, and it sounded wild and hard in the goodly hall: My lady, I said, thou art looking but pale now, and sick and downcast. Drink now to me out of this precious flasket, and thou shalt be whole and well.

And therewith I held the flasket aloft; but her face changed horribly; she sprang up in her chair and reached out her arm to clutch at the flasket, screaming like an eagle therewith. But I thrust her back into the chair with my left hand; and therewith arose Baudoin and Arthur, and caught her by the shoulders, and bound her fast to the

chair with cords that they had gotten thereto. But when she got her breath she yelled out: Ah, now shall all tumble together, my proudful house and I under it! Loose me, traitors! loose me, fools! and give me one draught of the water of might, and then shall I tell you all, and ye shall go free with your thralls if ye will. Ah! ye will not loose me? ye will not? Well then, at least ye, the fools, shall be under it, and they also, the she-traitors, the scourged and tormented fools that might not save themselves from me. O loose me! loose me! thou in whose arms I have lain so many a night, and give me to drink of the proud water of might!

So she yelled; and now had all the fairness gone from her body: flaggy and yellow were her limbs, and she looked all over as her face, a lump of stupid and cruel pride, and her words lost meaning and changed into mere bestial howling. But for me, since she so desired that water, I knew that it was good for us to drink, and I took out the stopple and drank, and it was as if fire ran through all my veins, and I felt my strength three-folded straightway, and most wondrous clear was my sight grown therewith; and I raised my eyes now and looked down the hall, and lo, there was Aurea, chained by the ankle to the third pillar from the dais; and over against her, Viridis; and next, to the fourth pillar, Atra. Then I cried in a loud voice that rang through the witch's hall: Lo what I see! And I ran round the head of the board, and thrust and dragged Baudoin and Arthur along with me, crying out: Come, come! they are found!

they are here! And I came to my sweetling, and found her clad but in her white smock, which was flecked with blood all about, and her face was wan and pined, and the tears began to run when she saw me, but no word came from her lips though the kissing of them was sweet.

Then I turned about to my two fellows, and they stood bewildered, not knowing what was toward; and I came to them and made them drink of the flasket, and their eyes were opened and the strength of giants came to them, and they ran each to his sweetling; but Baudoin, before ever he kissed Aurea, caught hold of the chain that bound her to the pillar, and by main force dragged it out. Wise was that, meseemed, for words were again come into the witch's howls, and I heard her: Ah, long may ye be playing with the chains, long! for now the house rumbleth toward its fall. Ah, the bitches are loose! Woe's me! to die alone! And once more she howled wordless, as both I and Arthur had our loves in our arms, and fell to following Baudoin out on to the perron and down into the fresh fragrant garden wherein now was the moon beginning to cast shadows.

Stood we then aloof from the house, and the rumbling whereof the evil hag had howled waxed into a thunder, and under our very eyes the great white walls and gold-adorned roofs fell together, and a great cloud of dust rose under the clear moon-lit sky.

We looked and wondered, and our loves also, but no word they spake; but ere the other two had

time to grieve thereat, I gave Viridis to drink of the water of might, and she fell to sweet speech straightway, of such sort and such wise as I will not tell you. Then I did the same by Aurea and Atra, and forthwith the speech flowed from them to their friends.

Full happy were we then in the early night-season, for the water of might gave them strength also, as to us, and healed all the stripes and wounds their bodies had suffered of the foul witch, and made their eyes bright, and their cheeks full and firm, and their lips most sweet, and their hands strong and delicious.

Now when we had stood gazing toward the melting of the beauteous palace for a little, we took our darlings in our arms again, whereas the chains would have hindered their walking, and went down to the lip of the water whereas lay the Sending Boat, so that we might be anigh our ferry in case of need; for we knew not what might betide the isle now its mistress had perished. Then we fell to and sawed off the chains from the dear ankles with our swords, and took Birdalone's lendings from the mail. And Aurea had her gown again, and Viridis her smock, and my green surcoat over it, and Atra wore the battle-coat of the Black Squire. As for their bare feet (for Atra would not have hers dight prouder than her sisters'), we so clad them with kisses that they were not ill-covered belike.

So gat we aboard our ferry, and did blood-offering to the wight thereof, and so sped merrily and lovingly over the wide lake back on our homeward

road. And we said: This hath the dear Birdalone done for us.

And now, my Viridis, I will that thou fill up the tale by telling to Birdalone, as ye told us, how it fared with you three and the evil one from the time that ye sped Birdalone on her way till the moment when mine eyes first beheld you made fast to the pillars of the palace which has crumbled into dust.

CHAPTER X. HOW IT FARED WITH THE THREE LADIES AFTER THE ESCAPE OF BIRDALONE.

VIRIDIS took up the word without more ado, and said: I will do my best herein, and ye, sisters, must set me right if I err. When we had seen the last of you, dear Birdalone, that early morning, we turned back again to the house as speedily and as covertly as we might, lest the witch might espy our disarray and question us thereover. Then we went to the wonder-coffer, and gat thereout raiment for that which we had given away, which was easy for us to do, whereas the witch-mistress was so slothful that she had given to us the words of might wherewith to compel the coffer to yield, so that we might do all the service thereof, and she not to move hand or foot in the matter. So when we were clad, and the time was come, we went into the hall, by no means well assured of our mistress.

When we came before her, she looked on us in surly wise, as her wont was, and said nought for a while; she stared on us and knit her brows, as if she strove to call to mind something that ran to and fro in her memory; and I noted that, and for my part I trembled before her. But she spake at last: Meseemeth as if there is a woman in the isle besides you three; some misdoer that I was minded to punish. Tell me, you! was there not a naked one who came into this hall a while ago, one whom I threatened with pining? Atra, who was the bold-

est of us, bowed the knee before her, and said: Nay, our lady, since when do stranger women come naked into thine hall, and dare thee there?

Said the witch: Yet have I an image of a naked woman standing down there before me; and if I have it in mine eye, so should ye. Tell me therefore, and beware, for We are not bidden to hold Our hand from you if We take you in misdeeds.

If I quaked before, now much more I quaked, till my legs well-nigh failed me for fear; but Atra said: Great lady, this image will belike be of that one whom a while ago ye had stripped and tied to a pillar here, and tormented while ye feasted.

The lady looked on her hard, and again seemed striving to gather up the thrums of some memory, and then her face became smooth again, and she spake lightly: All that may well be; so do ye go about your due service, and trouble Our rest here no longer; for We love not to look on folk who be not wholly Our own to pine or to spare, to slay or let live, as We will; and We would that the winds and the waves would send Us some such now; for it is like to living all alone to have but such as you with Us, and none to cower before Us and entreat Us of mercy. So begone, I bid you.

Thus for that time were we saved from the witch's cruelty; but our time came before long. The days wore heavily, nor kept we count of them lest we should lose heart for the weariness of waiting. But on a day as we stood on the steps of the perron and served my lady with dainties, of a hot afternoon, came two great white doves a-flying, who pitched

down right before our mistress's feet; and each had a gold ring about his neck, and a scroll tied thereto, and the witch bade us take the doves and take off the scrolls and give them unto her; and she looked on the gold rings which the doves bore, and for a moment on the scrolls, and then she said: Take ye the doves and cherish them, lest We have need of them; take also the two scrolls and keep them till to-morrow morning, and then give them into Our hands. And look ye to this, that if ye give them not unto Us it will be treason against Us, and We shall have a case against you, and your bodies will be Ours.

Then she rose up slowly, and bade me to her that she might lean upon my shoulder and be helped upstairs, so slothful a beast as she was; and as we went up I heard her say softly to herself: Weary on it, now must I drink a sup of the Water of Might, that I may remember and do and desire. But dear is my sister, and without doubt she hath matters of import to tell me by these doves.

So when we were together alone I told the others hereof, and we talked it over; and they deemed the tidings ill, even as I did; for we might not doubt but that the doves were a sending from the witch-sister who dwelt at the House under the Wood; and sore we misdoubted that they were sped to our mistress to tell her of thee, Birdalone, and mayhappen of the Quest, so wise as we knew she was. As to the two scrolls, forsooth, they were open, and not sealed; but when we looked on them we could make nought of it; for though they were

writ fairly in Latin script, so that we read them, yet of the words no whit might we understand, so we feared the worst. But what might we do? we had but two choices, either to cast ourselves into the water, or abide what should befall; and this last one we chose because of the hope of deliverance.

Next morning, therefore, we came before our mistress in the hall, and we found her pacing up and down before the dais; though her wont was at that hour to be sitting in her throne of gold and ivory, lying back on the cushions half asleep.

So Atra went up to her, and knelt before her and gave her the scrolls, and she looked on her grimly, and smiled evilly, and said: Kneel there yet; and ye others kneel also, till I see what befitteth you. So did we, and indeed I was fain to kneel, for I might scarce stand up for terror; and all of us, our hearts died within us.

But the witch read those scrolls to herself, sitting in her throne, and spake not a long while; then she said: Come hither, and grovel before Us, and hearken! Even so we did; and she said again: Our sister, who hath been so kind unto you, and saved you from so many pains, here telleth Us, by the message of the two doves, that ye have betrayed Us and her, and have stolen her thrall and her Sending Boat, and sent her an errand for Our destruction; and therewith she delivereth you into Our hands, and ye are Ours henceforward; nor is it to be thought that ye may escape Us. Now, for your treason, some would slay you outright here and now, but We will be merciful, and let you live,

and do no more than chastise you sharply now; and thereafter shall ye be Our very thralls to do as We will with: thereafter, that is to say, when they whom ye have sent Our sister's thrall to fetch have come hither (as belike I may scarce stay them), and I have foiled them and used them, and sent them away empty. Now I tell you, that meanwhile of their coming shall ye suffer such things as We will; and when they be here We will not forbid you to be anigh them; but We shall see that there will be little joy to you in that nighness. Yea, ye shall know now to what market ye have brought your wares, and what the price of treason is therein.

Verily then we suffered at her hand what she would, whereof it would shame me to tell more as at this present; and thereafter did she chain us to those three pillars of the hall whereas ye found us chained; and we were fed as dogs be, and served as dogs, but we endured all for the sake of hope; and when we durst, and deemed the witch would not hear us, we spake together and enheartened each other.

But on the fourth day of our torment came the witch to us, and gave us to drink a certain red water from out of a leaden flasket; and when I drank I deemed it was poison, and was glad, if gladness might be in me at such a tide; and when I had drunk I felt an icy chill go through all my body, and all things swam before my eyes, and deadly sickness came over me. But that passed away from me presently, and I felt helpless and yet not

feeble; all sounds heard I clearer than ever yet in my life; also I saw the hall, every arch and pillar and fret, and the gleam on the pavement from the bright sun that might not enter; and the witch I saw walking up and down the hall by the dais; but my sisters I saw not when I looked across to their pillars. Moreover, I might not see myself when I reached out my hand or my foot, though I saw the chain which made my ankle fast to the pillar; and withal, when I set my hand on my face, or any other part of my body, or what else I might touch, I felt there what I looked to feel, were it flesh or linen, or the cold iron of my fetter, or the polished face of the marble pillar.

Now I knew scarce if I were alive or dead, or if I were but beginning to be dead; but there came upon me the desire of life, and I strove to cry out to the sisters, but though I formed the words in my mouth, and did with my throat as when one cries out aloud, yet no sound of a voice came from me, and more helpless did I feel than erst.

But even therewith I saw the witch come toward me, and therewith all my body felt such fear of her that I knew I was not dead. Then she came before me and said: O shadow of a thrall, whom none can see but them unto whom wisdom hath given eyes to see wonders withal, now have I tidings for thee and thy sisters, to wit, that your lovers and seekers are at hand; and presently I shall bring them into this hall, and they shall be so nigh unto you that ye might touch them if I did not forbid it; but they shall not see you, but

shall wonder where I have hidden you, and shall go seeking you to-day and many days, and shall find you not at all. So make ye the most of the sight of them, for in them henceforward ye have no other part or lot.

Therewith she spat out at me, and went over to my sisters, and said words of like import to those which she had said unto me. And presently she went out of the hall; and not long afterwards I heard voices speaking on the perron, and knew one for the voice of the witch, and the other for the voice of my lord Baudoin; and then again wore a little while, and I saw the witch come through the great door of the hall leading Sir Arthur by the hand, as if she were his dear friend, and Baudoin and Hugh, my man, following them. And the said witch was clad full fair, and had laid by her sloth and stupid pride, as meseemed; and her limbs were grown rounder and sleeker, and her skin fairer, so that to them that knew her not she might well seem to be a goodly woman.

Now they sat to meat as my man hath told you, and then departed from the hall, and the witch also. But after a while she came back again and loosed us, and grimly bade us go with her, and needs must we, though we could not so much as see our own feet upon the floor. And she set us to tasks about the house, and stood by while we toiled for her, and mocked us not without stripes, and in all ways was as rough and cruel and hard with us as she had been smooth and debonair to our lords; but after noon she brought us back and chained us to our

pillars again. And when the evening came and the banquet was, it was we who were the unseen players of the string-play; and we might play no other melody than what the witch bade us; else belike, could we have held converse, we might have played such tunes as would have smitten the hearts of our loves, and told them that we were anigh. To make a short story of it, thus did she day by day, and no comfort or converse might we sisters have of each other, or of aught else save the sight of our beloved ones, and a glimmer of hope therewith. And, forsooth, for as grievously as my heart was wrung by the yearning of me for my love, yet was it a joy unto me to think that he went there desiring me, and that I whom he desired was not the poor wretched creature chained there in her nakedness, with her body spoiled by torment and misery, but the glad maiden whom he had so often called fair and lovesome.

So passed the days, and at last hope had grown so pale and wan, that she was no more to be seen by us than we were by our lords; and now it seemed to me that death was coming, so feeble and wretched as I grew. But the witch would not let us die, but sustained us from time to time with some little draughts of a witch-drink that revived us.

So wore the time till that evening, when came hope together with the fulfilment of hope, so that one minute we durst hope for deliverance, and the next we were delivered.

Nor is there more to tell, Birdalone, my dear, save that we came safely to the Isle of the Young

and the Old in the full morning-tide; and as our ferry drew nigh the green shore, there were the two younglings whereof thou didst tell us awaiting our landing, and when we stepped ashore they came to us bearing cakes and fruit in a fair basket, and they made much of us and we of them. And so we came to the old man, who was exceeding fain of us, and grand and courteous, till he became a little drunk, and then he was somewhat over-kind to us women. Nevertheless, there in that pleasant isle we rested us for three days, that we might somewhat calm and refresh our spirits with what was small and of little account. And when we departed, the old man followed us down to the strand, and lamented our departure, as he had done with our lords erewhile; only this time yet greater was his lamentation, and needs must we kiss him, each one of us, or never had he been done. So he turned up landward, bewailing the miss of us, but presently, before we had seen the last of him, was cheerful again and singing.

So we went on our way; and we also, we maidens, in our turn, saw those woeful images of the Isle of Queens and the Isle of Kings; and we came to the Isle of Nothing, and abode warily by our ferry, and so came away safe, and thus, as thou wottest, home to the castle to hear evil tidings of thee. Now is this all my tale.

Birdalone sat shyly and hushed when all was done; and then all they did somewhat to comfort her, each after their own fashion; and now sorrow for the slain man was made softer and sweeter for

them, whereas they had to lose not two fellows, but one only. Yet, despite of all, trouble and care was on Birdalone's soul betwixt the joy of loving and being beloved, and the pain and fear of robbing a friend of her love. For Atra's face, which she might not hate, and scarce might love, was a threat to her day by day.

CHAPTER XI. BIRDALONE AND THE BLACK SQUIRE TALK TOGETHER IN THE HALL OF THE CASTLE.

NOW within a few days was the body of Baudoin laid in earth in the chapel of the castle; and in the solemnest of fashions was the burial done. When it was over, the two knights and Sir Aymeris turned them heartily to dighting the war against the Red Hold, and less than a month thereafter was the hosting at the Castle of the Quest, and if the host were not very many (for it went not above sixteen hundreds of men all told), yet the men were of the choicest, both of knights and sergeants and archers. There then they held a mote without the castle, whereas Arthur the Black Squire was chosen for captain, and in three days they were to depart for the Red Hold.

Now this while Birdalone had seen but little of Arthur, who was ever busy about many matters, and never had she had any privy talk with him, though sore she longed for it; yet indeed it was more by her will than his that so it was. But when it was come to the very last day before the departure, she said that she must needs see him before he went, and he perchance never to come back again. So when men were quiet after dinner she went into the hall and found him there, pacing up and down the floor. For indeed she had sent a word to him by Leonard the priest that he should be there.

So she went up to him, and all simply she took

him by the hand and led him into a shot-window and set him down by her; and he, all trembling for love and fear of her, might not forbear, but kissed her face and her mouth many times; and she grew as hot as fire, and somewhat she wept.

Then she spake after a while: Dear friend, I had it in my mind to say to thee many things that meseems were sage, but now neither will the thought of them come into my mind, nor the words into my mouth. And this is a short hour. And therewith she fell to kissing him, till he was well-nigh beside himself betwixt desire and joy and the grief of departure, and the hardness of the case.

But at last she forbore and said: Will it not be when thou art gone to-morrow as it was when ye were away upon the Quest, and I knew not how to bear myself, so heavy lay all the world and its doings and its fashion upon me? It will be hard to me, he said; evil and grim will be the days. She said: And yet, even now in these last days, when I see thee oft, every day my soul is worn with grief, and I know not what to do with myself. I shall come back, he said, and bear my love with me, and then belike we shall seek some remedy. She was silent a while, and then she said: Meanwhile of thy coming, and I see thee not at all for many days, how will it be with my grief then? Quoth he: More than enough of grief no soul may bear; for either death comes, or else some dullness of the pain, and then by little and little the pain weareth. Then she said: And how would it be if thou come not back and I see thee never again, or if when

thou come back thou find me not, for that I be either dead or gone away out of thy reach? He said: I know not how it would be. When thou sayest thou shalt die, dost thou wholly believe it in thy sense or thy body otherwise than Holy Church would? I will tell thee, she said, that now I am sitting by thee and seeing thy face and hearing thy voice, it is that only which I believe in; for I may think of nought else of either grief or joy. Yea, when I wept e'en now, it was not for sorrow that I wept, but for I cannot rightly tell what. And she took his hand and looked fondly upon him.

But presently she looked on his hand, and said: And now meseemeth that we twain are grown to be such close friends that I may ask thee what I will, and thou be neither angry, nor wonder thereat. I see on thy finger here the ring that I brought with me from the Isle of Increase, and which thereafter thou hadst of me when I gave thee back also the shoon which were lent unto me. Tell me how thou hadst it back from Atra, as I suppose thou gavest it unto her. But how now! art thou angry? for I see the blood come up in thy face. Nay, beloved, said he, I am not angry, but whenso I hear of Atra, or think of her closely, shame comes on me and confusion, and maybe fear. But now will I answer thee. For even in those hours which we wore on the Isle of the Young and the Old, when all we should have been so happy together, she divined somewhat of my case, or indeed, why do I not say it out, all thereof. And she spake to me such words (for she is both tender and wise

and strong of heart) that I cowered before her and her grief and pain; and she gave me back the said ring, which forsooth I gave to her in the Sending Boat in the first hour that the Isle of Increase lay astern of us. And I wear it now as a token of my grief for her grief. See now, love, since I have answered thee this question without anger or amaze, thou needest not fear to ask me any other; for this of all things lies closest to my heart.

Birdalone drooped her head, and she spake in a low voice: Lo now! the shadow of parting and the shadow of death could not come between our present joy; but this shadow of the third one cometh between us and is present between us. Woe's me! how little did I think of this when thou wert away and I was sick of longing for the sight of thee, and deemed that that would heal it all.

He spake not, but took her hand and held it; and presently she looked up again and said: Thou art good, and wilt not be angry if I ask thee something else; this it is: Why wert thou so grim with me that other day when ye found me in that evil plight in tow of the Red Tyrant, so that I deemed that thou of all others hadst cast me off? That was worse to me than the witch's stripes, and I kept thinking to myself: How simple was my trouble once, and now how tangled and weary!

Then he might not refrain him, but threw himself upon her, and clipped her and kissed her all he might, and she felt all the sweetness of love, and lacked nought of kindness and love to him. And thereafter they sat still awhile, and he said,

as if her question had but that moment left her lips: This, forsooth, was the cause that I looked grim on thee: first, that from the time I first saw thee and heard thy tale, and of thy deeds, I had deemed thee wise above the wisdom of women. But this going forth of thee to the Black Valley, whereof came the slaying of Baudoin, seemed unto me a mere folly, till again I had heard thy tale of that also; and then the tale and thy speech overcame me. But again, though I was grieved and disappointed hereat, belike that had passed from me speedily, but then there was this also which would not let my soul rest, to wit, that I feared concerning that slain knight whose head the Red One had hung about thy neck; for how else, methought, might he have been so wroth with him and thee; and meseemed, moreover, that thou wert kind in thine heart to the dead man, even when we were come to thee; and then, seest thou, my desire for thee and the trouble of Baudoin's slaying, and the black trouble aforesaid. Lo now, I have told thee this. When wilt thou cease to be angry with me?

She said: I ceased to be grieved with thine anger when thine anger died; yet strange, meseemeth, that thou shouldst trust me so little when thou lovest me so much!

And she leaned against him and caressed him gently, and again was he at point to take her in his arms, when lo! the sound of men coming unto the screen of the hall; so then those two stood up and went to meet them, and there was the speech of their sundering done. Yet belike for a little while both those twain were happy.

CHAPTER XII. THE KNIGHTS AND THEIR FELLOWS BETAKE THEM TO THE ASSAULTING OF THE RED HOLD.

ON the morrow, when the day was yet young, the knights were ready for departure, and in the very gate they bade farewell to the ladies, who kissed them kindly one and all, and Viridis wept sore; and Atra constrained herself to do even as the others did; but pale she was and quaking when she kissed Arthur and watched him get a-horseback.

But the knights bade their ladies be of good cheer, for that they would send them tidings of how they sped every seven days at least, whereas it was no long way thence to the Red Hold, save there were battle on the road, and they deemed their host which should beset the Hold would be enough to clear all the ways behind it. For that same cause withal they had Sir Aymeris with them, nor left a many men behind them, and they under the rule of three squires, whereof two were but young, and the third, who was made the captain of the castle, was an old and wise man of war, who had to name Geoffrey of Lea. There, withal, was the priest Sir Leonard, who went about now much hushed and abashed, and seemed to fear to give a word to Birdalone; albeit she deemed of him that his thoughts of her were the same as erst they had been.

So now when the knights were departed, and all

the host was gone out of sight, it was heavy time indeed in the Castle of the Quest till they should hear tidings of them again. Both Aurea and Atra kept much to themselves, and did I know not what to wear away the time; for now it was not to be looked for that they should venture out-a-gates. But as for Viridis, she waxed of better cheer after a while, but whatever betid she would not sunder herself from Birdalone; nay, not for an hour; and Birdalone took all her kindness kindly, though forsooth it was somewhat of a pain unto her; it shall be told wherefore ere long.

Withal, as if to wear the time, Birdalone betook her diligently to her needlework, and fell to the cunningest of broidery; so that Viridis and the others wondered at her, for when they were done it seemed indeed that the flowers and creatures and knots had grown of themselves upon the cloth, such wondrous work it was.

Moreover, to his great joy, the very first day of the departure of the host she called Sir Leonard unto her, and prayed to go on again with the learning her fair scribe-craft; and therein also was she diligent hours of every day; and Viridis would sit beside her wondering at the deftness of her fingers, and crying out for joy as the page grew fair and well-learned under them.

Thus wore a week, and at the end thereof came a messenger from the host and told how they had come before the Red Hold and had summoned them thereof to yield, which they had utterly denied to do, but defied the host; wherefore the

host had now beset the Hold, and more folk were daily flocking unto them; but that the said Hold would be hard to win by plain assault, whereas it was both strong and well-manned; but few of the host had been slain or hurt as yet, and of the chieftains not one.

Right glad were they of the castle because of these tidings; though, forsooth, the men-at-arms knew well enough that the time would soon come when some fierce assault would be made, and then, forsooth, would be sore peril of life and limb unto the chieftains.

CHAPTER XIII. BIRDALONE BETHINKS HER TO FULFIL THE PROMISE MADE UNTO ATRA.

AGAIN wore a week, and once more came the messenger, and did them of the castle to wit that there had been nought more done at the Red Hold, save skirmishing at the barriers, wherein few were hurt on either side; and also that the engines for battering the walls were now well-nigh all dight, and they would begin to play upon the Hold, and in especial one which hight Wall-wolf, which had been set up by the crafts of Greenford.

This tidings also was deemed good by all, save it might be by Atra, who, as Birdalone deemed, pined and fretted herself at the delay, and would fain that, one way or other, all were over. Atra spake but little to Birdalone, but watched her closely now; oft would she gaze on her wistfully, as if she would that Birdalone would speak unto her; and Birdalone noted that, but she might not pluck up heart thereto.

Wore a third week, and again came the messenger, and told how three days ago, whenas Wall-wolf had sorely battered one of the great towers which hight the Poison-jar, and overthrown a pan of the wall there beside, they had tried an assault on the breach, and hard had been the battle there, and in the end, after fierce give and take, they of the Hold had done so valiantly that they had thrust back the assailants, and that in the hottest brunt

the Black Squire had been hurt in the shoulder by a spear-thrust, but not very grievously; but withal that he sent, in so many words, forbidding the ladies to make any account of so small a matter. And, quoth the sergeant, most like my lord will wear his armour in four days' time; also now we have reared another great slinger, which we call Stone-fretter, and soon, without doubt, we shall be standing victorious within that den of thieves.

Now though these tidings were not so altogether ill, yet were those ladies sore troubled thereby, and especially Atra, who swooned outright when she had heard the last word thereof.

As for Birdalone, she made as little semblance of her trouble as she might, but when all was quiet again she went to find Viridis, and brought her to her chamber and spake to her, saying: Viridis, my sister, thou hast been piteous kind unto me from the first minute that thou sawest me naked and helpless, and fleeing from evil unto worse evil; nowise mightest thou have done better by me hadst thou been verily my sister of blood; and I know it that thou wouldst be loth to part from me.

Viridis wept and said: Why dost thou speak of parting from me, when thou knowest it would break my heart?

Said Birdalone: To say it as short as may be, because the parting must now come to pass. Viridis waxed pale and then red, and she stamped her foot and said: It is unkind of thee to grieve me thus, and thou doest wrong herein.

Hearken, dear sister, said Birdalone: thou

knowest, for thou thyself wast the first to tell me thereof, that I am the supplanter in our fellowship, and that I have undone Atra's hope. This I did not of mine own will, but it came unto me; yet of mine own will I can do the best I may to amend it; and this is the best, that I depart hence before the Red Hold is taken and my lords come back; for if they come back and I see my lord Arthur, so fair and beauteous as he is, before me, never shall I be able to go away from him. And lo thou, I have promised Atra by all the kindness she did me when we were come to the Wailing Tower, and I naked and quaking and half-dead with terror, that if occasion served I would do my utmost to help her, even if it were to my own grief. Now behold this that now is, is the occasion, and there will not be another; for when my love comes home hither and beholdeth me, think thou how all the desire which has been gathering in his heart this while will blossom and break forth toward me; and mayhappen he will make but little semblance of it before other folk, for proud and high of heart is he; but he will seek occasion to find me alone, and then shall I be with him as the lark in the talons of the sparrow-hawk, and he will do his pleasure of me, and that with all the good-will of my heart. And then shall I be forsworn to Atra, and she will hate me, as now she doth not, and then is all the fellowship riven, and that by my deed.

Yet was Viridis wrath, and she said: Meseemeth this is fool's talk. Will not the fellowship be all the more riven if thou depart and we see thee no more?

O nay, said Birdalone; for when I am gone thy love shall be no less for me, though as now thou art angry; and Atra will love me for that I shall have held to my promise to mine own scathe; and thy man and Aurea will lay it to me that I have done valiantly and knightly. And Arthur, how can he choose but love me; and maybe we shall yet meet again.

And therewithal she did at last bow down her head and fall to weeping, and Viridis was moved by her tears and fell to kissing and caressing her.

After a little Birdalone lifted up her head and spake again: Moreover, how can I dare to abide him? didst thou not see how grim he was to me when they delivered me and brought me back? and he with his own lips told me so much, that it was because he doubted that I had done amiss; and now if I do amiss again, even if it be at his bidding, will it not be so that he will speedily weary of me, and curse me and cast me off? What sayest thou, Viridis mine?

What is to say, said Viridis, save that thou hast broken my heart? But thou mayst heal it if thou wilt take thy words back, and tell me that thou wilt not sunder thee from us.

But Birdalone brake out weeping and lamenting aloud, and she cried out: Nay, nay, it may not be; I must depart, and Atra hath smitten me amidst of my friends. And Viridis knew not what to say or to do.

At last came Birdalone to herself again, and she looked sweetly on Viridis and smiled on her from

out her tears, and said: Thou seest, sister, how little a loss thou wilt have of me, a mere wild woman. And now nought availeth either me or thee but I must begone, and that speedily. Let it be to-morrow then. And when the messenger comes at the end of this week, send word by him of what I have done; and look thou to it but both our lords will praise me for the deed.

Said Viridis: But whither wilt thou, or what wilt thou do? To Greenford first, said Birdalone, and after whither the Good Lord shall lead me; and as for what I will do, I am now deft in two crafts, script and broidery to wit; and, whereso-ever I be, folk shall pay me to work herein for them, whereby I shall earn my bread. Hearken also, my sister, canst thou give me any deal of money? for though I wot little of such matters, yet I wot that I shall need the same. And I ask this whereas, as e'en now I said, I deem our lords shall praise my deed, and that, therefore, they would not that I should depart hence as an out-cast, wherefore they shall not begrudge it to me. Moreover, for the same cause I would thee speak to the old squire Geoffrey of Lea, and tell him that I have an errand to Greenford, and crave of him that he lend me one of the two younglings, Arnold or Anselm, and two or three men-at-arms to bring me safely thither; since now, forsooth, I need no more adventures on the road.

She smiled as she spake; and now all the pas-sion of anguish seemed to have left her for that while; but Viridis cast her arms about her neck

and wept upon her bosom, and said: Woe's me! for I see that thou wilt go whatsoever I may say or do; I strove to be angry with thee, but I might not, and now I see that thou constrainest me as thou dost all else. I will go now straightway and do thine errand.

Thus then they parted for that time; but it was not till the day after the morrow that Birdalone was alboun. Viridis told of her departure both to Aurea and Atra; and Aurea lamented it, but would not do aught to stay her; for she was waxen weary and listless since the death of her man. As for Atra, she spake but little concerning it, but to Viridis praised Birdalone's valiance and kindness. Yet unto herself she said: Verily she understood my word that I spake to her about the occasion of her helping. Yet woe's me! for she shall carry his love with her whithersoever she wendeth; and a happy woman is she.

But when Geoffrey the squire knew that the ladies, all three, were at one with Birdalone as to her departure, he doubted nothing, but bade Arnold, his mate, take four good men with him, and bring the Lady Birdalone unto Greenford and do her bidding there. Albeit, he deemed no less but they would bring her back again.

CHAPTER XIV. BIRDALONE LEAVES THE CASTLE OF THE QUEST.

ON the morrow morn, then, Birdalone spake farewell both to Aurea and Atra; but as for Viridis, she sent her word that she had no heart thereto, and yet she sent her a word of comfort, to wit, that she deemed that they would one day meet again. Aurea, in her parting words, part praised her, part chid her; saying that she did well and kindly and valiantly, as her wont was. Yet, said she, when all is said, thou mightest have abided this tangle and trouble, which at the worst had not been so evil as death between us. Yea, sister, said Birdalone, but might not death have come of my abiding?

As she spake, in came Atra, with her head somewhat drooped, meek and humble, her cheeks red, her hands trembling; and she said: Wilt thou take now my word of farewell and blessing, and the kiss of peace betwixt us, and bear away the memory of our kindness together?

Birdalone stood up proud and straight, and was somewhat pale as she suffered Atra to kiss her cheeks and mouth, and said: Now hast thou forgiven me that weird dragged me in betwixt thy love and thy goodhap; and I have forgiven thee that I am led away by weird into the waste and the wilderness of love. Farewell. Therewith she went her way to the gate, and the others followed her not.

Without abode her Arnold and the four men-at-arms, and her palfrey and a sumpter-horse bear-

ing two goodly coffers, wherein Viridis had let load raiment and other havings for her; and Arnold came up to her smiling, and said: My lady Viridis hath given me a pouch wherein is money to bear for thee to Greenford and hand over to thee there when we be safe; and she hath bidden me to be in all wise obedient unto thee, lady, which needed not, whereas now and from henceforth am I by mine own will thy very servant to do thy pleasure always and everywhere.

She thanked him and smiled on him kindly, so that his heart beat fast for joy and love of her; and therewith she gat into the saddle and they rode their ways together, and Birdalone looked back never till the Castle of the Quest was shut from their eyes by the nesses of the little hills.

Here ends the Fifth Part of the Water of the Wondrous Isles, which is called The Tale of the Quest's Ending, and begins the Sixth Part of the said tale, which is called The Days of Absence.

THE WATER OF THE WONDROUS ISLES. THE SIXTH PART: THE DAYS OF ABSENCE.

CHAPTER I. BIRDALONE RIDES TO GREENFORD AND THERE TAKES LEAVE OF ARNOLD AND HIS MEN.

ON the road to Greenford nought befell to tell of; they came thither when the sun was at point to set, for they had ridden diligently all day.

As they rode the streets of the good town, they noted of them, that though it was evening wherein folk do much disport them abroad, there were women and children enough in the streets or standing at their doors, but of carles very few, and they for the more part grey-heads.

Now did Arnold bring Birdalone to the town hall, wherein yet sat the deputy of the burgrave, who himself was in the leaguer at the Red Hold; this man, who was old and wise and nothing feeble of body, made much of Birdalone and her folk, and was glad of them when he knew that they had the seal and let-pass of Geoffrey of Lea; wherefore he gave them to eat and drink, and lodged them in his own house, and made them the best of cheer.

But betimes on the morrow did Birdalone send back Arnold and the four men-at-arms, with no tale but that such was her will; and bidding farewell to the said Arnold, she suffered him to kiss

her hands, and gave him a ring from off her finger, so that he went on his way rejoicing.

So soon as she saw him and his men well on the road, she went to the old man, the vice-ruler of the town, who was of the aldermen thereof, and did him to wit that she would wage two or three carles who could deal with horses and beasts, and withal handle weapons if need were, to be both as servants and guards for her, as she had errands in that country-side, and belike might well have to go from town to town thereabout. He took her asking kindly, but said it was none so easy to find men who for any wage would fare forth of Greenford at that stour, whereas well-nigh all their fighting-men were lying before the Red Hold as now. Howsoever, ere noontide he brought before her a man of over three score, but yet wayworthy, and two stout young men, his sons, and told her that these men were trusty and would go with her to the world's end if need were.

She took these men readily, and agreed with them for a good wage; and whereas each one had bow and arrows and short sword, she had but to buy for them jacks, sallets, and bucklers, and they were well armed as for their condition. Withal she bought them three good horses and another sumpter-horse; which last was loaded with sundry wares that she deemed that she needed, and with victual. Then she took leave of the alderman, thanking him much for his good-will, and so departed from Greenford at all adventure, when the day was yet young.

The alderman had asked her whither away, and

she had told him that she was boun for Mostwyke first, and thereafter for Shifford-on-the-Strand; whereas she had heard talk of these two towns as being on one and the same highway, and Mostwyke about a score of miles from Greenford; but when she was well out-a-gates she came to a little road on the right hand which turned clean away from Mostwyke, and she took the said road; and when she had followed it some three miles, she asked the old carle whither it led. He looked on her and smiled somewhat, and she on him in turn; and she said: Wonder not, my friend, that I am not clear about my ways, for I shall tell the sooth that I am a damsel adventurous, and am but seeking some place where I may dwell and earn my livelihood till better days come; and this is the whole truth, and thou shalt know it at once, to wit, that I am indeed fleeing, and were fain to hide the footsteps of me, and I bid you three to help me therein. But ye must know that I am fleeing, not from my foes, but from my friends; and, if ye will, as we go by the way, I will tell you all the story of me, and we will be friends while we are together, yea, and thereafter if it may be.

Now she said this because she had looked carefully on these men, and herseemed that they were good men and true, and not dull of wit. Forsooth the old man, who hight Gerard of the Clee, was no weakling, and was nought loathly to look on, and his two sons were goodly and great of fashion, clear-eyed, and well-carven of visage; they hight Robert and Giles.

Now spake old Gerard: Lady, I thank thee heartily of thy much grace unto me; now would I get off my nag and kneel to thee in the highway therefor, but that I see that thou wert fain to make as much way as may be to-day; wherefore, by thy leave, I will tarry my homaging till we rest our horses by the wayside. She laughed, and praised his wisdom; and the young men looked on her and worshipped her in their hearts. Forsooth, the fellowship of these good and true folk was soft and sweet to her, and soothed the trouble of her spirit. And she enforced herself to talk cheerfully with them, and asked them many things, and learned much of them.

But now went on Gerard to say: Lady, if thou wilt hide thy ways from whomsoever it may be, thou hast happened on no ill way; for though this road be good to ride, it is but a byway through the sheep-walks that folk may drive their wains hereby in the wet season of winter and spring; and for a great way we shall come to but little save the cots of the sheep-carles; scarce a hamlet or two for the space of two days' riding; and on the third day a little town, hight Upham, where are but few folk save at the midsummer wool-fair, which is now gone by.

Now there is a highway cometh into this road from out of the tilled country and Appleham, a good town, and goeth through it toward the tillage, and the City of the Bridges and the liberties thereof; and all the land is much builded and plentiful; but, if thou wilt, we will not take either highway, but

wend over the downland which lieth north-east of Upham, and though it be roadless, yet is it not ill-going, and I know it well and its watering-places, little dales and waters therein all running north-east, wherein be certain little thorps here and there, which shall refresh us mightily. Over that downland we may wend a four days, and then the land will swell up high, and from the end of that high land we shall behold below us a fair land of tillage, well watered and wooded, and much builded; and in the midst thereof a great city with walls and towers, and a great white castle and a minster, and lovely houses a many. In that city mayst thou dwell and earn thy livelihood if thou canst do aught of crafts. And if thou mayst not, then may we find somewhat to swink at for a wage, and so maintain thee and us. But the said city is called the City of the Five Crafts, and the land round about it is the frank thereof; and oftenest, frank and city and all, it is called the Five Crafts all simply. Now what sayest thou hereof, my lady?

She said: I say that we will go thither, and that I thank thee and thy sons of thy good-will, and so may God do to me as I reward you well therefor. But tell me, good Gerard, how it is that thou art so willing to leave kith and kin to follow a gangrel wife along the ways? Said Gerard: Dame, I think that the face and body of thee might lead any man that yet had manhood in him to follow thee, even if he left house and all to go with thee. But as for us, we have no longer a house or gear, whereas they of the Red Hold lifted all my bestial, and

burned my house and all that was therein a month ago. Yea, said Birdalone, and how befalleth it, then, that ye are not before the Red Hold to avenge thee? Dame, said he, when the muster was I was deemed somewhat over old, wherefore the sheriff took me not, but suffered my sons also to abide behind to earn a living for me; may God be good to him therefor, and St. Leonard! But as to my kindred, I must tell thee that I am not kinned hereabout, but in a good town hight Utterhay, and that when our alderman sent for me to bring me to thee, I was more than half-minded to get me back thither. Now sooth it is that the best way thither, though it may be indeed the safest rather than the shortest, lies through the Five Crafts; for the road goes thence to Utterhay a three score miles or so, making the longer of it, as it skirteth ever some way off a perilous forest, a place of sore dread and devilish, which hight Evilshaw, on the edge whereof lieth Utterhay, a merry cheaping-stead and a plenteous, and the home of my kindred. Wherefore now is the City of the Five Crafts handy to us; because when thou hast done with us, as I hope it may be long first, then are we others nigh home, and may all simply wend our way thither.

Birdalone thanked him again full heartily; but therewithal as they rode along there seemed to stir in her some memory of the earliest of her days in the witch's house, and she began to have a longing to betake her to Utterhay and the skirts of Evilshaw.

CHAPTER II. OF BIRDALONE AND HER FELLOWSHIP, THEIR FARING OVER THE DOWNLAND.

THUS rode they along and loitered not, though they talked blithely together; and Birdalone wondered to herself that she might so much as hold up her head for bitter thoughts of the days and the longings but late passed away, but so it was, that it was only now and again that they stung her into despair and silence, and for the most part she hearkened to the talk of the old man and the lads about the days of Greenford and the alarms of lifting and unpeace, and the ways of the chapmen and the craftsmen.

An hour after noon they rested in a little dale of the downland where was a pool and three thornbushes thereby; and when they had lighted down, the old man knelt before Birdalone and took her hand, and swore himself her man to do her will, whatso it were; and then he stood up and bade his sons do likewise; so they two knelt before her in turn, somewhat shy and abashed, for all that they were such stout, bold fellows, and found it hard to take her hand, and then when they had it in theirs, hard to let it go again.

A score of miles and five they rode that day, and had no roof over them at night save the naked heaven, but to Birdalone that was but little scathe: they made a shift to have some fire by them, and the three men sat long about it that even while Birdalone told them somewhat of her life; and as

she told of the House under the Wood and the Great Water, Gerard had some inkling of whereabouts it was; but was nought so sure, because, as above-said in this tale, seldom did any from the world of men venture in Evilshaw, or know of the Great Water from its banks that gave unto the forest.

In like wise they rode the next day, and came at eventide to a thorp in a fair little dale of the downland, and there they guested with the shepherd-folk, who wondered much at the beauty of Birdalone, so that at first they scarce durst venture to draw nigh unto her until Gerard and his sons had had some familiar converse with them; then indeed they exceeded in kindness toward them, in their rough upland fashion, but ever found it hard to keep their eyes off Birdalone, and that the more after they had heard the full sweetness of her voice; whereas she sang to them certain songs which she had learned in the Castle of the Quest, though it made her heart sore; but she deemed she must needs pay that kindly folk for their guestful and blithe ways. And thereafter they sang to the pipe and the harp their own downland songs; and this she found strange, that whereas her eyes were dry when she was singing the songs of love of the knighthood, the wildness of the shepherd-music drew the tears from her, would she, would she not. Homelike and dear seemed the green willowy dale to her, and in the night ere she slept, and she lay quiet amidst of the peaceful people, she could not choose but weep again, for pity of the bitter-sweet of her own love, and for pity of the wide world withal, and all the ways of its many folk that lay so new before her.

CHAPTER III. THEY COME TO THE CITY OF THE FIVE CRAFTS, AND BIRDALONE MEETS WITH THE POOR-WIFE.

THEY made not so much way that they came to the Five Crafts on the fourth day, but lay under the bare heavens in a dale below the big swell of the downland, whereof Gerard spake. But betimes in the morning Birdalone arose and stirred up her men, and they gat to horse, and rode the hill before them till they came on to the crest thereof. Then Birdalone cried aloud with joy to see the lovely land before her, and the white walls and the towers of the great city, whereas Greenford was but small beside it.

So they rode down into the frank, and entered the gates of the city a little after noon, and again was Birdalone in all amaze at the going to and fro in the streets and the thronging of the markets, and the divers folk, as chapmen and men-at-arms, and craftsmen and lords, who used the said city; and to say sooth, somewhat her heart sank within her, and it seemed to her that it would be hard and troublous to have to deal with so much folk, and that they must needs go past her on the right hand and the left without heeding her life.

Howsoever, Gerard, who knew the city, brought her to a fair hostel, where she was well lodged, she and her men. Straightway, then, before she went out into the streets again, she fell to getting together what she had of fine broidered work and of

fair script, and to finishing what she had unfinished. And she sent forth Gerard and his sons to find out where was the market for such goods, and if she would have leave to sell the same therein, or anywhere in the town; and Gerard found the hall of the embroiderers, and therein the master of the craft, and he received the carle courteously when he heard that there was fine work come to town, and did him to wit that none in any such craft might have freedom of the market save by leave of the guild of the craft; but, said he, the guilds were open-handed and courteous, and were nowise wont to refuse the said leave, were the work good and true; and he bade Gerard withal tell his mistress that she were best to bring samplings of her work to the Guildhall so soon as she might. So the very next day went Birdalone thither, and found the master a well-looked tall man of some five-and-forty winters, who looked on her from the first as if he deemed it were no ill way of wearing the time. To this man she showed her work, and though he found it not easy to take his eyes off Birdalone herself, yet when he looked at her handiwork, he found it better than very good, and he said to her: Damsel, here is what will be sought for at a great price by the great lords and ladies of the land, and the rich burgesses, and especially by the high prelates; and so much of it as thou hast a mind to do is so much coined gold unto thee; and now I see thee what thou art, I were fain that thou gathered good to thee. But as diligent as thou mayst be, thou hast but one pair of hands, wonderful soothly, and yet

but one pair. He broke off at that word, for he was verily staring at her hands, and longing to see more of her arms than the wrists only, so that he scarce knew what he was saying. Then he turned red and said: Soothly I wot that no other hands save thine may do such needlework, or make the draughts for them. But thou wilt need women-servants to help thee, both in dighting the house for thee (for this big old carle here will be scarce meet thereto) and as apprentices to help thee about the work itself; and if thou wilt, I shall seek the best ones out for thee. Moreover I must tell thee, that though I know for sure how that no woman in the world may work such needlework as thine, yet whiles there cometh hither a woman of middle age, a woman worn by troubles, pious, meek, and kind; and by St. Lucia! now I look on thee again, she might be somewhat like unto thee, were she young and fresh-looking and strong as thou art. Now this woman I say, and thereat I marvel, doeth needlework that is somewhat after the manner of thine, and which seemed to us excellent till I had seen thine. Good livelihood she earneth thereby, and is diligent therein; but she hath no heart to get apprentices, or be made one of our guild, both of which were lawful to her as to thee, lovely damsel. But now I shall counsel her to be made of our guild along with thee, if thou wilt have it so, and then may ye both have three apprentices each, and may make in our city a goodly school, so that our guild shall be glorified thereby, for there will be none such work in the world. How sayest thou?

She thanked him much, and yeasaid him, and thought in her heart that such work which would keep her hands and her head both busy, would solace the grief of her heart, and wear away the time, that she might live till hope might peradventure arise in her.

Then said the master: There is one thing else, that is, thy dwelling-place; and if thou wilt I shall hire thee a house in the street of the Broiderers, a goodly one: sooth to say, that same is mine own, so thou mayst deem that I tell thee hereof to mine own gain; and that may be (and he reddened therewith); but there is this in it, that if thou lackest money I shall let thee live therein without price till thou shalt have earned more than enough to pay me.

Birdalone thanked him well, but she did him to wit that she was nowise penniless; and presently she departed well pleased, though she deemed that the said master was well-nigh more friendly than might be looked for. And the next day he came to her in the hostelry, and without more ado brought her to the house in the street of the Broiderers, and she found it fair and well plenished, and so she fell to work to get all things ready.

Now the next week was the day appointed when she should be received into the broiderers' guild, and the day before came the master aforesaid to see Birdalone. Sooth to say, he had not failed to come to see her every day, on one pretence or another, since the first day they had met, but ever he did to her with all honour and simply. But on this day he brought with him the woman skilful of her

hands, to show her unto Birdalone, who received her gladly, and thereafter Master Jacobus left them alone together.

The said woman looked worn and aged indeed, but was not of more than five-and-forty winters even by seeming, after the first look at her; she was somewhat tall and well-knit, her face well shapen, and her hair yet goodly. There was a kind look in the eyes of her, as if she might love anyone with whom she lived that would be kind to her. Meek, or rather over-meek, of mien she was, and it seemed of her that she had been sore scared and oppressed one while or another.

So when Master Jacobus was gone, Birdalone set her down on the settle beside her, and spake to her full sweetly and kindly, and the woman spake little in turn save answering simply to her questions. Birdalone asked where she was kinned, and she answered: In Utterhay. Then said Birdalone: Within these last few days I have heard that town named twice or thrice, and never before, as meseemeth; and yet, hearing the name from thy mouth, it seemeth to stir something in me, as if I had been there one time and longed to be there again. Is there aught in the place whereof folk tell wide about, so that I might have heard it told of and not noted it at the time? Nay, lady, said the dame, save perchance that it is on the verge of a very great and very evil wood, otherwise it was once a merry town and of much resort from the country-side.

Birdalone looked on her, and saw that the tears were coming from her eyes and running down her

cheeks as she spake; so she said to her: Why dost thou weep, mother? Is there aught I may do to assuage thy grief? Said the dame: Thou art so kind to me, and thy voice is so dear and sweet, that I cannot choose but weep. Meseems it is because love of thee hath taken mine heart, and therewith is blended memory of past sorrow of mine. Thou askest me if thou mayest do aught to assuage my grief; dear lady, I am not grieved now, that has gone by; nay, now I am more than not grieved, I am made happy, because I am with thee. But since thou art so debonair with me, I will ask thee to do somewhat for me; and that is, to tell me of thy life gone by; I mean, sweet young damsel, of thy life when thou wert a little child.

Then Birdalone kissed her and said: It goes to my heart that thou lovest me; for soon as I set eyes on thee my heart went out to thee; and now belike we shall be dear friends; and that is a thing that shall avail me much, to have a friend who is so much older than I, so that nought can come between us, of the love of men and other griefs. Yea, now, said the dame, smiling somewhat sadly; now do I see the water standing in thine eyes, and thy voice quavers. Is it so, thou lovely kind damsel, that thou hast been grieved by love of a man? Who then may prevail in love if thou prevail not? And she fell to fondling Birdalone's hand; but Birdalone said: It is over-long to tell of all my life, mother, though I be so young; but now I will do as thou badest me, and tell thee somewhat of my days when I was little.

And therewith she fell to telling her of her days in the House under the Wood, and the witch and her surliness and grimness, and of her love of the wild things, and how she waxed there. And she spake a long while, for the memory of those days seemed to lead her along, as though she verily were alive now in them; and the woman sat before her, gazing on her lovingly, till Birdalone stayed her tale at last and said: Now have I told thee more than enough of a simple matter, and a life that was as that of a wild creature of the woods. Now shalt thou, mother, tell me somewhat of thee, and what was thy grief of Utterhay: for thou shalt find that the telling thereof shall solace thee. Ah! so think young folk, said the woman sadly, because there are many days left for them to hope in. But though the telling of my sorrow be a fresh sorrow to me, yet shalt thou hear it. It is but of the loss of my babe; but she was of all babes the fairest and the sweetest.

Then she fell to telling Birdalone all that concerning the witch at Utterhay and the poor-wife that ye have heard in the beginning of this book, until the time when she left the house to buy meat for the witch; for she herself was the said poor-wife. And then she told how she came back again and found her guest gone and the child withal; and though she had wept for love of Birdalone, she wept not at telling of this grief, but told it as a tale which had befallen some other one. And she said: And so when I had done running up and down like a wild thing, and asking of the neigh-

bours with lack of breath and fierceness of speech who had taken my child away from me; and when I had gone up to the wood and even some way into it, and when I had wandered up and down again, and night was falling, I came back at last again to my poor house so weary with my woe, that I scarce knew what had befallen me. And there upon the board lay the victual and drink which I had brought, and the money which the witch had given unto me; and despite of grief, hunger flamed up in me at the sight, and I threw myself on to it and ate and drank, and so came to myself, that is, to my grief. But the next day I ran about hither and thither, and wearied folk with my asking and my woe; but it was all of none avail. The child was gone away from me. There is little more to tell of me, sweet lady. If I were to live, needs must I take the poor price of my little one, to wit, the witch's money, and deal with folk for my livelihood; wherefore I bought me cloth and silks, having now the wherewithal, and set to work on broidery, for even then was I a cunning needlewoman. So were God and the saints good to me, and inclined the folk to me, that they were good and piteous, and I lacked not work nor due livelihood; but after a while I wearied of Utterhay, where my dear child should have been running about before my feet; and having by this time gotten a little money together, and being exceeding deft in my craft, I came on hither to live, and, praise be to St. Ursula! I have found it easy to live: and praise be to All-hallows withal that I have

found thee, who art so kind and lovely; and thou by seeming of the very age my child should be if she be living: or how old art thou, dear lady?

Birdalone laid her hand on her breast, and she was turned pale, but she said in a low voice: I deem that I am of twenty summers.

Then they both sat silent, till Birdalone might master the fluttering of her heart, and she said: Now meseems I have a memory even earlier than those I told thee erst. A woman took me out of a basket and set me on the back of an ass, and I looked about, and I was in a grassy lawn of the woods; and I saw a squirrel run up a tree-trunk before me, and wind round the tree and hide him; and then I stretched out my hands and cried out to him; and then came the woman unto me, and gave me wood-strawberries to eat out of her hand.

Brake out the poor-wife thereat, pale and trembling: Tell me now, my child, hast thou any memory of what the woman was who set thee on the ass and gave thee the strawberries? Birdalone looked on her, and scanned her face closely, and then shook her head, and said: Nay, it was not thou, mother. Nay, surely; nay, surely, said the woman; but think again. Said Birdalone, speaking slowly: Was it my mistress then? She was a tall woman, somewhat thin and bony, with goodly red hair and white-skinned, but thin-lipped. Quoth the poor-wife: No, no; it is of no use; nought such was she. Then Birdalone looked up and said eagerly: Yea, but it was her other shape belike: therein was she a tall woman, dark-haired, hook-nosed,

and hawk-eyed, as if of thirty summers; a stark woman. Hast thou seen such? dost thou remember her?

The woman sprang up and cried out, and was like to have fallen, but Birdalone arose and held her in her arms and comforted her, and set her in her seat again and knelt before her; and presently the poor-wife came to herself and said: My child, thou sayest do I remember her; how shall I ever forget her? she was the thief who stole my child.

Therewith she slid from off her seat, and knelt by Birdalone, and stooped low down on the floor as if the tall maiden were but a little one, and she fell to kissing her and patting her, her face and her hands, and all about; and said, sobbing and yet smiling: Suffer me a little, my child, mine own lovely child! For in good sooth I am thy mother, and it is long since I have seen thee: but hearken, when I come quite to myself I shall pray thee not to leave me yet awhile, and I shall pray thee to love me.

Birdalone clipped and kissed her, and said: I love thee dearly, and never, never shall I leave thee.

Then they stood up, and the mother took Birdalone by the shoulders, and held her a little aloof, and devoured her with her eyes; and she said: Yea, thou hast grown tall, and belike wilt grow no taller: and how fair and lovely thou hast grown; and thou that wert born in a poor man's house! no wonder that any should covet thee. And I, I wonder if ever I was as fair as thou art; forsooth many called me fair for a little while; and now be-

hold me! Nay, child and darling, let not thy face grow downcast, for now shall I know nought more of fear and grief; and is it not like that I shall grow fairer of flesh, and shapelier, in the happy days we shall dwell together? And therewith she took her to her arms, and it seemed as if she might never have enough of clipping and embracing her; and she would look at Birdalone's hands and her feet and her arms, and stroke them and caress them; and she wondered at her body, as if she had been a young mother eaten up with the love of her first-born. And as for Birdalone, she was as glad of her mother as might be; and yet in her heart she wondered if perchance one of the fellowship might stray that way, and be partaker in her joy of this new-found dear friend; and she said, might it be Viridis; but in her inmost heart, though she told it not to herself, she longed that the Black Squire might find her out at last.

CHAPTER IV. OF THE LOVE OF GERARD'S SONS AND OF JACOBUS FOR BIRDALONE.

NOW dwelt Birdalone in rest and peace when she had been taken into the guild along with her mother, and they had taken the due apprentices to them; and they began to gather much of goods to them, for of fine broidery there was little done in the Five Crafts, and none at all that could be put beside their work, either for beauty of the draught of it, or for skill of handiwork. She declared unto all folk how that the poor-wife (who had to name Audrey) was her very mother, from whom she had been stolen in her youngest days; but she told none any tale of how she was stolen. And the twain dwelt together in the greatest loving-kindness; and it was with Audrey as she had forecast, that now her days were happy, and she living in all ease and content, that the goodliness of her youth came back to her, and she became a fair woman as for her years; and therewith it grew to be clear that the two were so much alike one to the other, that all might see that they were mother and daughter.

Gerard and his two sons she maintained yet as her men; and not only were they of much use to her in fetching and carrying, but also true it is that her beauty was so manifest, that she whiles needed a stout lad weaponed at her back when she was in the streets or amidst the throng of the market; and many were they, and whiles of the highest, who

craved love of her, some with honour, and some with lack of it.

Of these, forsooth, were but two that anywise troubled her; and the most trouble was this, that she might not fail to see that the love of her had entered into the hearts of the two Gerardsons, Robert and Giles; so that times were when she deemed she must even send them away, but when it came to the point she had not the heart thereto; though none other remedy there seemed, so sorely as their souls were wounded by longing for her. It is not to be said that they ever spake to her thereof, or wittingly wearied her with signs of love; but they could not so easily cover it up but that it was ever before her eyes. But she suffered it all for friendship's sake and for their true service, and in all friendliness did what she might to solace their grief. Forsooth so good and true she found that father-kind, and the young men so goodly and kind, that she said to herself, had she not another man lying in her heart, she might well have chosen one of those twain for her very speech-friend and true lover.

The second wooer that troubled her was the master, Jacobus, who, when but three months were worn of her dwelling in her house, did all openly crave her love and offer her marriage, he being a man unwedded. Sore was her heart that she must needs gainsay him, so kind and courteous as he had been to her at their first coming together; though this indeed is sooth, that straightway, so soon as he saw her, he fell into the captivity of her love.

Howsoever, gainsay him she needs must, and he took the naysay so hardly that he was scarce like a man before her, and wept and prayed and lamented many times over, till she wearied of it, and well-nigh fell to loathing him. So that it came to this at last, that one day she spake to him and said that she might no longer bear it, but must seek another house and leave his. There then was the to-do, for he fell on his knees before her, and kissed her feet, would she, would she not, and cried out in his grief, till at last for pure weariness of his folly she gave way unto him, and said that she would still abide there; whereon he rose up from her and went away with all the grief run off him for that time, and as glad a man to look on as you might see on a summer's day.

But the next morning he came unto her again, and she thinking all was begun afresh, made him no glad countenance; but he stood up before her and spake friendly, and said how that she was in the right of it, and that if they both dwelt in one house together they were like to have but a weary time of it, both she and he. But, said he, I will not that thou shouldst depart out of this house, for a goodly one it is, and full meet for thee; it is for me to depart, and not for thee. I tell thee, forsooth, that I had from the first meant this house as a gift from me to thee. And therewith he drew from his pouch a scroll, which was a deed of gift of the said house, duly sealed and attested, and he gave it into her hands; but she was sore moved thereat, and at the demeanour of him that morning, and she let the scroll fall to the floor and wept for

pity of him, and reached out both her hands, and he kissed them, and then her lips also, and sithence he sat down beside her. But she said: Alas! that thou wilt give me what I may not take, and wouldst have of me what I may not give.

But now he waxed hotter, and said: This once I command thee to do my will, and take my gift. It will be nought to my gain if thou take it not; for I may not live in this house when thou art gone from it; and I swear by All-hallows that I will not let any have it to hire, nor will I sell it, since thou hast made it holy by dwelling therein.

Yet was she sore moved by his generous fashion, and she said: I will take thy gift then, and live here in honour of thee and thy friendship; for well I wot thou hadst no mind to buy me with thy gift.

So she spake, and he stood up stark and stern, and so departed, and kissed her not again; though meseems she would have suffered him had he offered it. Nay, belike had he at that moment pressed his wooing somewhat masterfully, it is not so sure but she might have yeasaid it, and suffered him to wed her and lead her to bed; though it would have gone ill both with him and with her thereafter.

Thenceforth dwelt Birdalone with her mother and her maidens and her men in that house, and it became famous in the Five Crafts because of her beauty and her wisdom, which minished not, but waxed day by day; but therewithal as the time wore, waxed her longing and sadness. But all this she hid in her own heart, and was debonair to all about her, and so good to poor folk that none had a word save of blessing on her beauty and her wisdom.

CHAPTER V. OF THE DEATH OF AUDREY, MOTHER TO BIRDALONE. SHE IS WARNED IN A DREAM TO SEEK THE BLACK SQUIRE, AND IS MINDED TO DEPART THE CITY OF THE FIVE CRAFTS, AND SEEK AGAIN THE CASTLE OF THE QUEST.

THUS dwelt Birdalone in the Five Crafts in such rest and peace as her heart would let her; and dear and good friends she had about her; her mother first, whose love and desire for love of her made all things soft and dear unto her. Gerard and the Gerardsons were next, who were ever faithful and true unto her, and deft both of hand and of mind, so that they wrought many things for her avail. Then came the master, Jacobus, who held himself unwedded for her sake, and though he no longer dwelt in the same house with her, might scarce endure to miss the sight of her for two days running: a dear friend she deemed him, as forsooth he was, though whiles he tormented and wearied her, and belike had wearied her more, but for the sorrow which lay on her own heart, whereof it came that she might not think of any man as of one who might be a lover, and so felt safe even with so kind a friend and so stubborn in his love as was this one. Moreover he never again craved love of her in so many words, but only in his goings and comings so did, that it was clear how he had her, and the love of her, ever in his heart.

Wore thus a five years; and then came a sickness on the city, and many died thereof; and the said sickness entered into Birdalone's house, and slew Audrey her mother, but spared all else therein. Thereby at the first was Birdalone so overwhelmed that she might heed nought, neither her craft nor her friends, nor the days to come on the earth for her. And moreover when she came more to herself, which was not for many days, and asked why her friend Jacobus had not been to see her the last days, she was told that he also was dead of the pestilence; and she sorrowed for him sorely, for she loved him much, though not in the way he would.

And now did the city and land of the Five Crafts begin to look unfriendly to Birdalone, and she fell to thinking that she must needs depart thence, as she well might do, whereas she had foison of goods: and at first it was in her mind to go with Gerard and his sons unto Utterhay; but then she deemed the thought of her mother, and how she would be ever thinking of the loss and the gain, and the loss once more stood in the way; and she turned one thing and another over in her mind, and might not face it.

On a night, as she slept, came to her dreams of her days in the House under the Wood (as very seldom betid), and the witch-wife was speaking to her in friendly fashion (as for her) and blaming her for fleeing away, and was taunting her with the failure of her love, and therewith telling her how fair a man and lovesome was the Black Squire, and

what a loss she had of him; and Birdalone was hearkening and weeping for tenderness' sake, while the witch was unto her neither fearful nor irksome, and forsooth nought save a mouthpiece for words that both grieved Birdalone and yet were an eager pleasure unto her. But in the midst thereof, and ere the dream had time to change, Birdalone awoke, and it was an early morning of later spring, and the sky was clear blue and the sun shining bright, and the birds singing in the garden of the house, and in the street was the sound of the early market-folk passing through the street with their wares; and all was fresh and lovely.

She awoke sobbing, and the pillow was wet with her tears, and yet she felt as if something strange and joyous were going to betide her, and for joy of the love of life the heart beat fast in her bosom.

She arose all darling naked as she was, and went to the window and looked out on the beauty of the spring, while the sound of the market-wains brought to her mind the thought of the meads, and the streams of the river, and the woodsides beyond the city; and she fell a-longing for them, as a while she knelt on the window-seat, half dreaming and asleep again, till the sun came round that way, and its beams fell upon her bosom and her arms; and she stood up and looked on the fairness of her body, and a great desire took hold of her heart that it might be loved as it deserved by him whom she desired. And thus she stood there till she became ashamed, and hastened to do on her raiment; but even as she was about it, it came upon her that what

she had will to do was to seek to the Castle of the Quest, and find out where was her love if there he were not, and so to seek him the world over till she found him. And such a flood of joy possessed her when she thought this, and so eager to begone she was, that she deemed every minute wasted till she were on the road.

Nevertheless, in a while, when her mind was steadied, she knew that she had somewhat to do ere she might be gone, and that here, as oft, it would be more haste less speed.

So she abode a little, and then came into her hall duly dight, and found Gerard and his sons there to serve her; and she brake her fast, and bade them sit by her at table, as oft she did; and she spake to them of this and that, and Gerard answered lightly again; but the two Gerardsons looked at one another, as though they would speak and ask a question from time to time, but forbore because they durst not. But Gerard looked on them, and deemed he wotted what was in their minds; so at last he spake: Our lady, both I, and meseemeth my sons also, deem that there is some tidings toward which are great unto thee; for thine eyes sparkle, and the red burns in thy cheeks, and thine hands may not be quiet, nor thy feet abide in one place; wherefore I see that thou hast something in thy mind which strives to be forth of it. Now thou wilt pardon us, our dear lady, that we ask concerning this, because it is in our love for thee that we speak, lest there be some change toward which shall be a grief to some of us.

My men, said Birdalone, flushing red, sooth it is that there is a change at hand, and I shall tell you straightway what it is. Years ago I told you that I was fleeing from my friends; now the change hath betid that I would seek them again; and needs must I leave the Five Crafts behind to do so. And moreover there is this ill word to be said, which I will say at once, to wit, that when I am but a little way gone from the Five Crafts I must wend the other deal of my journey birdalone, as my name is.

All those three sat silent and aghast at that word, and the young men grew pale; but after a while spake Gerard: Our lady most well-beloved, this word which thou hast spoken, to wit, that thou needest us no longer, I have looked to hear any time this five years; and praise be to the saints that it hath come late and not soon. Now there is no more to be said but that thou tell us what is thy will that we should do.

Birdalone hung her head awhile for sorrow of sundering from these men; then she looked up and said: It seemeth, my friends, as if ye deem I have done you a wrong in sundering our fellowship; but all I may say hereon is to pray you to pardon me, that I needs must go alone on my quest. And now what I would have you do, is first of all to fetch hither a notary and scrivener, that he may draw up a deed of gift to you, Gerard and Gerard-sons, of this house and all that is therein, saving what money I may need for my journey, and gifts such as I shall bid you to be given to my work-

women. Ye must needs yeasay this, or ye are forsworn of your behest to do my will. But furthermore, I will have you to let the workwomen of mine (and the head one ruling) to hire the aforesaid house, if so they will; for now are they skilled, and may well earn good livelihood by the work. But the next work is simple; it is to furnish for me the array of a young man, with such armour as I may easily bear, to dight me for my road. Forsooth ye wot that not unseldom do women use the custom of going arrayed like men, when they would journey with hidden head; and ye may happen upon such gear as hath been made for such a woman rather than any man; but thou shalt get me also a short bow and a quiver of arrows, for verily these be my proper weapons that I can deal with deftly. Now my last command is that, when all is done, maybe to-morrow, or maybe the next day, ye bring me out of the city and the frank of the Five Crafts, and bring me somewhat on my way over the downs, for loth am I to part from you ere needs must. Then they knelt before her and kissed her hands, and they were full of grief; but they saw that so it had to be.

Thereafter Gerard spake with his sons apart, and in a while came to Birdalone, and said: Our lady, we will do your will in all wise; but we shall tell thee, that the Five Crafts will look but strange to us when thou art gone, and that we have a mind to betake us to Utterhay and the land of our kindred. Wherefore we pray thee to give this house that hath been so dear to us unto thy workwoman

and her mates; for we need it not, nor the hire thereof, but shall do well enough with what money or good thou mayst give us. Is this according to thy will, or have I spoken rashly?

She said: Ye are good and ungreedy, and I bless you for it; be it as ye will; and this the more, as I were fain that ye go to Utterhay; for whiles I have deemed that I myself am drawn thitherward, wherefore it may be that we shall meet again in that place.

And when she had so spoken, she might not refrain her tears; and the Gerardsons turned away, for they were ashamed, both that they should see her weep, or she them. But at last she called to them and said: Now make we the speediest end we may of this, for sorry work is the tarrying of farewell; so I pray you, my friends, to go about the work I have bidden you.

So all was done as she would, and the day after the morrow was Birdalone abiding the coming of Gerard and his sons with the horses; and despite of the sundering of friends and the perils that belike lay before her, the world seemed fair to her, and life beginning anew. And she made no doubt that she would soon be at the Castle of the Quest, and there find all things much as she had left them; and there at least would be the welcome of her dear friend Viridis.

CHAPTER VI. OF THE SUNDERING OF BIRDALONE FROM GERARD AND HIS SONS.

PRESENTLY were the horses come with Gerard and his sons, and Birdalone gat to horse amongst them. She was armed in a light hauberk, and over it a long and loose surcoat that came down beneath the knee of her; and a sallet she had upon her head, wide but light, so that not very much of her face was to be seen. She had made up her mind to this tale upon the road, when she was among folk, that she was under a vow not to do off her helm for a seven days' space. Withal she had covered up the lovely shapeliness of her legs with long boots of deer-leather, and her surcoat was wide-sleeved; she was well hidden, and whereas she was a tall and strong woman, she might well pass for a young man, slender and fair-faced. She was girt with a good sword, and Gerard had gotten her a strong horseman's bow and a quiver full of arrows, wherewith, as aforesaid, she knew well how to deal; wherefore she was by no means without defence.

So they went their ways through the streets and out-a-gates; and it must be said, that were not Birdalone's thoughts turned toward the Castle of the Quest, and what she should meet there, her heart had been somewhat sore at leaving the city which had cherished her so well these years past; nay, as it was, the shadow of the southern gate, as she past thereunder, smote somewhat cold upon her, and she

silently bade farewell to the City of the Five Crafts with some sorrow, though with no fear.

Forth they rode then through the frank and up on to the shepherd country, and whereas their horses were of the best, and they had no sumpter-beast with them till they came to Upham, where they must needs have victual, they made but five days of it to the place where the road turned aside from the country of Mostwyke. There then they drew rein, and Birdalone lighted down from her horse, and they all, and they lay upon the grass and ate and drank together.

But when they were done, spake Birdalone and said: Dear friends, this is the hour and the place when we must needs part; for ye shall go back again to Five Crafts, and do what I have bidden of you, and do your will, and wend your ways with your livelihood unto Utterhay. But as for me, I must go my ways first unto Greenford, and thence to seek my friends from whom erst I was fleeing when ye first became my friends. Now perchance ye will say that I have taken you up in my need, and cast you aside at my pleasure; but I may only say that there be at present two deals of my life, and of one of them have ye been partakers, and of the other ye may not be. Forsooth that is a grief unto me, as I suppose unto you is it a greater one. But unto me also were it heavier but that my heart tells me it shall not ever be so; for as I said to you some days agone, I have a hope that we shall yet meet again, be it in Utterhay or in some other place. And now I pray you to pardon me wherein I may

have done amiss unto you, and begrudge it not that there be others, who indeed were first-comers in regard to you, and whom I love better than you; for of your truth and your good-will and loving-kindness will I bear witness wheresoever I may be.

Then spake Gerard: Do ye speak, my sons; for I have no grudge against her, nor aught to bewail me as to her, save, it may be, that I am now so well on in years that it may well befall that I shall not live till the time of the meeting in Utterhay. But I will pray thee this, dear lady, that if thou come to the place where I lie dead thou wilt kiss my burial-stone, and sing due masses for me. Nay, she said, but this is the worst shall betide betwixt us.

Then spake Robert Gerardson: I am not deft of speech, but this parting makes me bold to say this: that from the time when first I set eyes on thee I have loved thee in such wise that never mayst thou love me as much as I love thee, if thou hast anywhere, as I deem thou hast, a lover of thy body, whom thou lovest. Now I have seen that for a long while thou hast known this, and hast ever because of it been as meek and kind with me as thou mightest be. And this hath partly grieved me the more, because it hath eked my longing for thee; and yet it hath comforted me the more, because it hath made me deem better of thee, and deem thee worthier of worship and holier; therefore have thou all my blessing for it. And now I know that thou sunderest from us that thou mayst go seek thy very bodily lover; and I say, that if the sundering had

been for any lighter cause, grieved at heart should I have been; but since it is even so, once more I bless thee, and ever shall I be happy in the thought of thee; and if ever we meet again, still shalt thou find me as now I am in heart and in soul.

She turned to him, not dry-eyed, and said: I know that what thou sayest is sooth; and thou hast guessed right as to my goings; and I take thy blessing with love and joy.

Then were they silent; but Giles Gerardson was struggling with words, for he was slow to speech; at last he said: I say much as saith my brother: but see thou, our lady, how ill it had gone if thou hadst loved one of us with an equal love; woe worth the strife then! But now I will crave this of thee, that thou kiss me on the lips, now whenas we part; and again, that thou wilt do as much when first we meet again hereafter. And I tell thee right out, that if thou gainsay this, I shall deem it unfriendly in thee, and that those lovely words which thou didst speak e'en now were but words alone, and that thou art not as true as I have deemed thee.

She laughed amidst her tears, and said: Dear lad, doom me not till I have been found guilty! I shall nowise naysay thee this, for I love thee, and now and ever shalt thou be unto me as a brother, thou and Robert also; for even so have ye done by me. But thou wottest, dear lad, that whiles and again must sister sunder from brother, and even so it has to be now.

Then they sat silent all four; and thereafter Bird-alone arose and did off her sallet, and kissed and

embraced Gerard and his sons, and bade them farewell, and she and the young men wept. Then she armed herself and gat to horse, and went her ways towards Greenford, having nought with her but the raiment and arms that her body bore, and her horse, and some gold pieces and gems in a little pouch. So rode she; and the others turned back sadly toward the Five Crafts.

CHAPTER VII. BIRDALONE COMETH TO GREENFORD, AND HEARS OF THE WASTING OF THE CASTLE OF THE QUEST.

NOW came Birdalone riding into Greenford an hour before sunset on a day of the latter end of May; and she had no doubt but to go straight to the hostelry, and that the less as she had not abided there before, as hath been told. To them that served her she told the tale of her vow, that she might not do off her sallet that seven days; and some trowed her, and some deemed her a woman, but whereas she seemed by her raiment to be of condition none meddled with her. Moreover, as she told her intent to ride on betimes in the morning, it mattered the less unto them: withal she gave out that she came from foreign parts, as sooth it was.

In the evening she sat in the hall, and with her were three chapmen travelling with their wares, and two good men of the town sitting; and they were talking together, and were courteous and blithe, and amidst their talk they threw many a glance at the slim and fair young squire, as Birdalone seemed, and were fain to speak unto him, but refrained them for courtesy's sake. For her part, Birdalone longed sore to ask them somewhat of the Castle of the Quest, but the words clave to her throat for very fear; and she sat restless and ill at ease. However at last said a townsman to a chapman: Art thou for the Red Hold, Master Peter, when thou

art done here? Birdalone turned very pale at that word; and Master Peter spake: Yea, surely, neighbour, if the folk leave aught in my packs for others to buy. He spake in a jovial voice, as if he were merry, and the others all laughed together, as though they were well pleased and in good contentment. And now, deemed Birdalone, would be her time to speak if she would learn aught; so she constrained herself at last, and spake, though in a quavering voice: Meseems then, masters, this good town is thriving as now? This I ask because I am a stranger in these parts this long while, and now I am come back hither fain were I to find the land in good peace; for I may chance to take up my abode hereby.

The goodmen turned to her and smiled kindly when they heard the sweetness of her voice; and one of them said: Sir of the sallet, ye shall be content with the peace in this land, and the thriving of its folk; the very villeins hereabout live as well as franklins in most lands, and the yeomen and vavassours are clad as if they were knights of a good lord's household. Forsooth their houses are both goodly and easy to enter; and well is that, whereas there lacks never good meat and drink on the board therein. And moreover their women are for ever seeking whatso is fair and goodly, whatso is far-fetched and dear-bought, whereof we chapmen also thrive, as thou mayst well deem. Ah! it is a goodly land now!

The others nodded and smiled. But Birdalone spake, hardening her heart thereto for very need:

Belike then there is a change of days here, for when I last knew of the land there was little peace therein. And that will not be so long agone, said a townsman, smiling, for I doubt we should see no grey hair in thine head if thy sallet were off it. Birdalone reddened: It will be some five years agone, said she. Yea, yea, said the townsman, we were beginning to end the unpeace then, and it was the darkest hour before the dawn; for five years agone we and the good knights of the Castle of the Quest were lying before the walls of the Red Hold. Forsooth we cleared out that den of devils then and there. What betid unto it after ye won it? said Birdalone, and she trembled withal. Said the townsman: Heard ye never of the Black Squire, a very valiant knight, since thou sayest that thou hast known this country-side? She bowed a yeasay, for this time she found it hard to speak.

Well, said the townsman, we held garrison in the Red Hold for some three months, and thereafter we craved of him to come and be our captain therein; for, even after the Hold was won, there was yet a sort of runagates that haunted the country-side, men who had no craft save lifting and slaying. And forsooth we knew this Lord Arthur for the keenest and deftest of men-at-arms; so he yeasaid our asking, and did all he might herein, and forsooth that was all there was to do; for he was ever in the saddle, and at the work. Forsooth he was not a merry man, save when he was at his busiest; and little he spake in hall or chamber, else had he been

better beloved. But at least by no man better might the land have been served.

There was silence a little, and Birdalone waxed deadly pale; then she strove with herself and said: Thou sayest he was and he was; is he dead then? Said the townsman: Not to our knowledge. When he had brought the land into good peace, which is some three years and a half agone, he went his ways from the Red Hold all alone, and we saw him no more. But some folk deem that he hath entered into religion.

Birdalone's heart sickened, and she thought to herself that now all was to begin again; yet she felt that the worst was over since he was not dead, and she was able to think what she should do. So she said: Mayhappen he hath gone back to the Castle of the Quest? Nay, nay, said the townsman, that may not be; for waste is that house now; there is none dwelleth there, save, it may be, now and again a wandering carle or carline abideth there a day or two. Said Birdalone: How hath that befallen? or where is gone Sir Hugh, the Green Knight? Said the townsman: We knew the Green Knight well; frank and free and joyous was he; all men loved him; and his lady and speech-friend, none ever saw a lovelier, and as kind as was he. But we might not keep them with us; they are gone into their own country. Sir Hugh left the Castle of the Quest some three months after the Black Squire came to us for captain, and he gave over the castle to Sir Geoffrey of Lea, an old and wise man of war. But not many months thereafter we

heard that he also had departed, leaving it ungarnished of men; and we deem that the cause thereof is that something uncouth is seen and heard therein, which folk may not endure. Is it not so, my masters?

They all yeasaid that, and the talk went on to other matters. As for Birdalone, though her hope to come amongst friends was so utterly overthrown, yet she saw not what to do save to go her ways to the Castle of the Quest, and see if perchance she might find any tidings there. And she said to herself, that if the worst came to the worst, she would herself dwell there as an hermit of love; or, maybe, to face those uncouth things and see if any tidings might be compelled out of them.

CHAPTER VIII. BIRDALONE COMETH TO THE CASTLE OF THE QUEST, HEARETH THE TALE THEREOF FROM LEONARD, AND DEPARTETH THENCE BY THE SENDING BOAT.

SHE arose betimes on the morrow, and was out of Greenford so soon as the gates were open, and at first made all speed that she might toward the Castle of the Quest; and nothing hindered her, for the land was verily in good peace, and she might have come there if she would before sunset, for all whom she met furthered her. But as the day waned her courage waned with it, so that at last she stayed some six miles short of the house, and craved shelter at a yeoman's stead there, which was granted her with all kindness; and they made much of her, and she told them her vow of the sallet, and they deemed nought save that she was a young man.

She departed early in the morning with their Godspeed, and while the day was yet young came into the meadows before the castle, and saw the towers thereof rising up before her: then she checked her horse, and rode on no faster than a foot's pace; yet as slow as she might ride, needs must she get to the gate while the day was yet young.

So came Birdalone by that bower wherein she had slept that first night she came to the castle; and she reined up to look on it; and as she sat there gazing, came a man out from it clad as a man of religion; and her heart beat quick, and she

was like to fall from her horse, for there came into her mind what the townsman had said, that the Black Squire had gone into religion. But the hermit came towards her with a cup of water in his hand, and he cast his hood aback from him, and she saw at once that it was Leonard the priest, and though it was not the friend whom she sought, yet was she glad that it was a friend; but he came and stood by her, and said: Hail, wayfarer! wilt thou drink of our well and rest thee a while? So she took the cup and drank of the water, looking kindly on him, while he wondered at the beauty of her hand, and misdoubted him. Then she gave him back the cup and lighted down off her horse, and took the sallet from her head, and spake: I may not pass by a friend without a word; think if thou hast not seen me before?

Then he knew her, and might not refrain him, but cast his arms about her and kissed her, weeping; and she said: It is sweet to me to find a friend after what I have been told of yonder house. Yea, said he, and art thou going up thither? Certes, said she, and why not? Said he: They are gone, and all gone! How and whither? said she. But I must full certainly go thither at once; I will go afoot with thee; do thou tether my horse till thou comest back.

He said: But wilt not thou come back? I know not, she said: I know nought save that I would go thither; let it be enough that I suffer thee to go with me, and on the way thou shalt tell me what thou canst of the tale.

Then went Leonard and tethered the horse, and they went together afoot to the gate; and Birdalone told what she had heard of Arthur and Hugh; and Leonard said: This is true, and there is not much else to be said. When the Black Squire came back from the leaguer of the Red Hold, and had heard before of thy departure, he was heavy of mood and few-spoken, and wandered about as one who might find no rest; yet was he not stern with Atra, who for her part was no less heavy-hearted: soothly a sad company we were, and it was somewhat better when my Lord Arthur went his ways from us; and indeed eager he was to be gone; and it could be seen of him that he was fain of the toil and peril which they of Greenford offered him. Then in some four months spake my lord Hugh that he also would be gone to a place where were both a land and folk that would look friendly on him; so he went with my lady Viridis and my lady Aurea, and they had Atra also with them; and me also they would have had, but my heart failed me to leave the place where I had been so glad and so sorry with thee; death had been better; wherefore in yonder bower as in an hermitage I serve God and abide my time. But though I wot nought of where is gone the Black Squire, I know whereto those four are gone, and it is but a seven days' ride hence, and the land is goodly and peaceable, and if they be not dead, most like they be there yet. How sayest thou then, thou dearest and kindest, wilt thou thither to them? For if so, I may well lead thee thither.

Birdalone shook her head. Nay, she said, I deem that I am drawn elsewhither, but soon I shall tell thee. Lo now the gate. But ere we enter, tell me of Sir Geoffrey of Lea, and why it was that they might not abide the uncouth things, or if there were any such. Spake Leonard: Things uncouth there were, and I was called upon to lay them, and I did as biddeth Holy Church in all wise, but prevailed not against them, and still were they seen and heard, till folk might endure it no longer.

And what like were these things? said Birdalone, and are they yet seen and heard? Said Leonard: Strange it is, but last night I went into the great hall where they mostly betid, and laid me down there, as whiles I do, for I fear them not, and would see if they yet appear; but all night came nothing at all. As to the likeness of them .. Then he stopped, but said presently: Hard it is to tell thee of them, but needs must I. There be two of these things; and one is an image of a tall woman of middle-age, red-haired, white-skinned, and meagre, and whiles she has a twiggen rod in her hand, and whiles a naked short sword, and whiles nought at all. But the voice of her is cursing and blaspheming and ill-saying.

Said Birdalone: This is then a fetch of my witch-mistress of whom I told thee erst, and the image of her; what is the other? Said Leonard: I were fain not to tell thee. Yet needs must thou, said Birdalone. Dear lady, said Leonard, the other is an image of thee, and even most like unto thee; but whiles clad in a scanty grey coat and barefoot,

and whiles clad in a fair green gown goodly broidered, and broidered shoon; and whiles all mother-naked.

And what voice cometh from mine image? said Birdalone, smiling, yet somewhat pale withal. Said Leonard: One while a voice of sweet singing, as of a bird in the brake, and that is when thou art clad; and again, when thou art naked, a voice of shrieking and wailing, as of one enduring torments.

Spake Birdalone: And when did these wonders begin? Said he: Not till after Sir Hugh and thy she-friends were gone hence.

Pondered Birdalone a little; then she said: I see herein the malice of my witch-mistress; she would not send these fetches while Hugh was here, lest he should turn to seeking me with all his might. But when they departed, she would have the castle waste, and then she sent them, wotting that thereby she would rid her of Sir Geoffrey of Lea; while, on the other hand, I was nought so much unto him that he would spend all his life seeking me. But now I deem I know so much of her that I may bid thee to look on her as dead if these fetches come not again within a little while. Then mayst thou send and do Sir Geoffrey to wit thereof, and belike he will come back again; and fain were I thereof, for it will be merrier if the Castle of the Quest be dwelt in once more.

Yea, verily, said Leonard; but far merrier yet wert thou to dwell there. Nay, she said, but now I see that it is not fated for me. Let us go in, for I would get to what I would do.

So therewith they passed under the shadow of the archway, and Birdalone stayed not but went straightway into the hall, and through it; and the priest, who lagged somewhat behind her speedy feet, cried out unto her: Whither wilt thou? what chamber wilt thou visit first? But she stayed not, and spake to him over her shoulder as she went: Follow me if thou wilt; I have but one place only to come to ere I leave the Castle of the Quest, save I must needs turn back on my footsteps.

Then Leonard came up with her, and she went her ways out of the hall, and out on to the water-swale of the castle, and so to the little haven of the water-gate. There Birdalone looked about her eagerly; then she turned to Leonard and pointed with her finger and said: Lo thou! there yet lieth my ferry of old time, the Sending Boat; now wot I wherefore I was drawn hither. And her eyes glittered and her body quivered as she spake.

Yea forsooth, said Leonard, there it lieth; who of all folk in the castle had durst to touch it? But what hath it to do with thee, O kindest lady?

Friend, she said, if this day weareth, and I am yet within these walls, then meseemeth there must I abide for evermore; and there perchance shall I meet that seeming of myself, maybe for this night, maybe for ever, till I die here in this castle void of all that I love, and I over-young for it, friend. And I know now that there is hope within me; for I bethink me of a dear friend over yonder water of whom I have never told any, nor will tell thee now, save this, that she is the wisdom of my life.

Wherefore now I will try this ferry and wot if the wight thereof will yet obey the voice of the speaker of the spell, who has shed of her blood to pay therefor. Put not forth a hand therefore nor speak a word to let me, but take this farewell of me, with my pity and such love as I may give thee, and let me go, and think kindly of me.

Then she went up to him, and laid her hands upon his shoulders, and kissed him, and turned about without more ado and stepped into the boat; then she sat down and stripped her arm of its sleeve, and drew forth a knife and let blood of her arm, and then arose and smeared stem and stern therewith, and then sat down with her face to the stern and sang:

> The red raven-wine now
> Hast thou drunk, stern and bow;
> Wake then and awake
> And the Northward way take:
> The way of the Wenders forth over the flood,
> For the will of the Senders is blent with the blood.

Then she abode a little, while Leonard stood staring on her speechless with grief and blinded with his bitter tears, till the boat began to move under her, and presently glided out of the little haven into the wide lake; then she turned her face back unto him and waved her hand, and he knelt down and blessed her, weeping. And so she vanished away from before him.

CHAPTER IX. BIRDALONE FINDETH THE ISLE OF NOTHING GREATLY BETTERED, AND IS KINDLY ENTREATED THERE.

NOW it was scarce noon when she departed, and the dark night came upon her in the midst of the water; and she fell asleep in the boat ere the night had grown very old, and woke up in the morning, not exceeding early, maybe about six o'clock; then she looked ahead and thought presently to see the ill-favoured blotch of the Isle of Nothing on the bosom of the blue waters, whereas it was a fair and cloudless morning of latter May. Sure enough she saw land ahead, and it lay low down on the water, but she deemed from the first that it was green of hue, and as she neared it she saw that it was verily as green as emerald. Thereat she was a little troubled, because she thought that mayhappen the Sending Boat had gone astray, and that if the wight thereof were not wending the old road, maybe he was not making for the old haven. For now indeed she told herself right out that her will was to go back again to the House under the Wood, and see what might betide there, and if she and the wood-mother together might not overcome the witch.

But whatever might happen nought could she do but sit in her place and wend as the Sending Boat would; and in an hour's space she was right under the lee of the land, and she saw that it was shapen even as the Isle of Nothing had been afore-

time. But this made her wonder, that now the grass grew thick down to the lip of the water, and all about from the water up were many little slim trees, and some of them with the May-tide blossom yet on them, as though it were a fair and great orchard that she was nearing; and moreover, beyond all that she saw the thatched roofs of houses rising up.

Presently then the Sending Boat had brought her to the land, and she stepped ashore, but was wary, and gat her bow bent and set an arrow thereto ere she began to go up from the water. Yet she thought within herself, it will be nought ill if I be come amongst folk, so long as they be peaceful, or else how might I live the journey out to all the isles and so home to the House under the Wood?

So she turned her face to where she had seen those roofs, which now she saw no longer because of the thick leaves of the little trees, and so went along a narrow path, which grew to be more and more closely beset with trees, and were now no longer apple and pear and quince and medlar, but a young-grown thicket of woodland trees, as oak and hornbeam and beech and holly.

At last as she went she heard voices before her, so she stole warily to the edge of the copse, finger on shaft; and presently could see clear of the saplings and out on to a wide space of greensward, beyond which was a homestead of many houses and bowers, like unto that of a good yeoman in peaceful lands, save that the main building was longer, though it were low. But amidst the said green-

sward was a goodly flock of sheep that had been but of late washed for the shearing, and along with the sheep four folk, two carles and two queans, all of them in their first youth, not one by seeming of over a score and two of summers. These folk were clad but simply, man and woman, in short coats of white woollen (but the women's coats a little longer than the men's), without shoon or hosen; they had garlands of green leaves on their heads, and were wholly unarmed, save that one of the men bore an ashen wand in his hand. As for their bodies, they were goodly of fashion, tanned indeed by the sun's burning, but all sweet of flesh were they, shapely and trim, clean-made, and light and slim.

Birdalone's heart yearned toward them, and she stepped straightway from out of the cover of the coppice, and the sun flamed from her sallet and glittered in the rings of her hauberk, so that the folk might not fail to see her; the sheep fled bundling from her past their keepers, who stood firm, but seemed somewhat scared, and moved not toward Birdalone. She gave them the sele of the day and stood still herself; but the man with the ash-wand said: Hail, thou man; but we would have thee come no nearer a while, though thy voice be sweet: for we know what things they be which thou bearest, and that thou art a warrior. Wilt thou hurt us?

Birdalone laughed as sweetly as the blackbird sings, and she did off her sallet and shook the plenteous hair down over her, and then drew forth her

sword and dagger and cast them to earth, and laid her bow and quiver of arrows upon them, and said: Now will I come to you, or ye shall come to me, whereas I am unweaponed, and no warrior, but a woman, and ye are four to one, and two of you carles; wherefore now ye may bind me or slay me if you will; but in any case I pray you first to give me a mouthful of meat.

When she had done her speech, she went up to the fairest of the women and kissed her; but the two carles made no more ado but came to Birdalone and kissed her one after other, and that as men who needed nought to compel them therein, and each thereafter took a hand of her and held it and caressed it. But the other woman had run into the house as soon as Birdalone spoke, and came back again with a treen bowl full of milk and a little loaf, not white but brown; and there blundered about her legs as she came a little lad of some three winters old, naked and brown, who was shy of the gleaming new-comer, and hid him behind the woman one while, and the other while came forth to see the new thing. But the woman said: Dear woman, here is for thee some of the ewes' milk, and a bite of bread, and a little deal of cheese; the said milk is yet warm, so that it is not yet clottered; but if thou wilt come with us thou mayest speedily drink cows' milk, and we be now at point to go milk them.

Birdalone thanked her with a heart full of content, and was not ill-pleased to get her hands free from the two carles; so she sat down and ate her

breakfast while they talked with her, and told her of diverse work of theirs; as to how their trees were waxing, and new tillage they had done the past spring, and how it befell to the kine and the goats; of their children also they spake, and how there were already four thereof, and one of the women, the meat-bringer, already quickened with child once more. So that ere we die, quoth the carle who was speaking, we look to see many grandchildren, and shall have some stout carles and queans here. And by that time will some of the trees be well grown, so that we may fell timber and make us some keel that will wend the lake, and help us a-fishing; or we may go to other lands; or whiles folk may come to us, even as thou hast, thou dear-handed, sweet-voiced woman. But wilt thou abide here ever?

Yea, said the other, but that is looking forward a long while, that building of ships. What is nearer and well to think of is, that these apple and pear trees be so well fruited, small as they be, that this harvest we shall be able to make us cider and perry; yea, and no little deal thereof. But art thou minded to abide with us ever? That were dear to us; and belike thou wouldest bear us children, thou also.

Then spake the meat-fetching woman and laughed withal: Nay, thou also lookest aloof a pretty deal; whereas what is now to do is to go milk the kine, and to take this guest with us, so that she may drink somewhat better than ewes' milk though the cider be not ready to hand. But tell me, our dear guest, art thou verily going to abide

with us a long while? that were sweet to us, and we will do all we may to pleasure thee.

Nay, said Birdalone, it will no better be but that I depart on the morrow; and all thanks do I give you for your kindness.

The woman kissed her, and she arose, and all they went together to the milking of the kine some half mile inland; and they passed through much of orchard, and some deal of tillage, wherein the wheat was already growing high; and so came they to a wide meadow through which ran a little stream, and therein was a goodly herd of kine. So they fell to the milking, and made Birdalone drink of the sweet cows' milk, and then went and lay down under the shade of the little young trees, and talked and were merry together. But the men were both of them somewhat willing at first to kiss Birdalone and toy with her, but when she let them know that she desired it not they refrained them without grudging.

All this while of their talk they asked Birdalone nought of whence and whither, and she would not ask them, lest it might stir their asking, and then she would have to tell them some deal of her story; and telling it was now become unto her somewhat weary work.

In a while they arose all, and the men and one woman went their ways to deal with the acreland, but the meat-fetcher went back with Birdalone into the house; and she showed her all that was therein, which was for the more part, forsooth, the four babes aforesaid. The others came back in the even-

tide, bearing with them foison of blue hare-bells, and telling joyously how they had found them anigh the coppice edge in such a place: and thereafter they were merry, and sang and talked the evening away, and showed Birdalone at last to a fair little chamber wherein was a bed of dry grass, where she lay down and slept in all content.

CHAPTER X. OF BIRDALONE'S FLITTING FROM THE ISLE OF NOTHING.

ON the morrow Birdalone arose betimes, and would not tarry despite all the kindness of that folk and the change which had come over the Isle of Nothing; so the friends saw her down to the boat all together, and bore down with them a deal of bread and cheese and late apples of the last year, for her provision on the road, and a pail of milk withal; and men and women they kissed her at departure, and the meat-fetcher said: If by any means thou mayst find a keel which will carry thee hither, at some time, I would thou wouldst come; for even if thou be old, and we passed away, yet here shall be our children or our grandchildren to welcome thee; and we will tell them the tale of thee that they remember it and long for thee.

Then Birdalone kissed her again, and made much of her, and so stepped into the boat, and fell to her sacrifice to the wight thereof; and those others stared at her and wondered, and spake nought unto her till she was gone gliding over the face of the waters; but as they walked back to the house, they spake amongst themselves that this must be some goddess (for of Holy Church they knew nought) who had come to visit them in her loveliness; and in after times, when this folk waxed a many, and tilled all the isle and made ships and spread to other lands and became great, they yet had a memory of Birdalone as their own very lady

and goddess, who had come from the fertile and wise lands to bless them, when first they began to engender on that isle, and had broken bread with them, and slept under their roof, and then departed in a wonderful fashion, as might be looked for of a goddess.

But as for Birdalone, she came not back ever, nor saw that folk again, and now she sped over the water toward the Isle of Kings.

CHAPTER XI. COMING TO THE ISLE OF KINGS BIRDALONE FINDETH THERE A SCORE AND TWO OF FAIR DAMSELS WHO WOULD FAIN HAVE HER COMPANY.

BIRDALONE came ashore at the said isle at the day-dawn, and saw but little change in the isle when it grew light, and still the castle stood looking down awfully on to the meadows. But when she had set foot on the land, she handled her bow lest the worst might befall, and looked about her, deeming that this time she would not go her ways to the dread show that was arrayed in the castle, if forsooth those dead folk yet abode there.

So now as she looked across the meadow, she saw one with light and fluttering raiment come forth from the trees, and look toward her whereas she stood flashing and gleaming in the sun like an image of the God of Love turned warrior. Now Birdalone deemed for sure that this was a woman; she saw her come a little nigher to her, and then stand looking at her under the sharp of her hand; then she turned about and ran back to the brake whence she came; and presently Birdalone heard the sound of voices coming thence, and in a little while thereafter came forth from the said brake a rout of women (one score and two as they were told thereafter) and walked over the meadow straight unto her. She stood where she was, so as to be nigh unto her ferry in case they willed her unpeace;

for though they were weaponless by seeming, they were a many.

When they were come near they stood about her in a half ring, whispering and laughing each to each. Birdalone saw that they were all young, and that none of them might be called ungoodly, and some were full fair. They were bright and fine of array. Most bore gold and gems on fingers and neck and arms; they were clad in light, or it may be said wanton raiment of diverse colours, which had only this of their fashion in common, that they none of them hid over-much of their bare bodies; for either the silk slipped from the shoulder of her, or danced away from her flank; and she whose feet were shod, spared not to show knee and some deal of thigh; and she whose gown reached unsheared from neck to heel, wore it of a web so thin and fine that it hid but little betwixt heel and neck.

Birdalone stood gazing on them and wondering, and she had a mind to think that they were some show sent by her old mistress the witch for her undoing, and she loosened her sword in its sheath and nocked an arrow.

But then ran forward two of the damsels and knelt before her, and each took an hand of her and fell to kissing it, and she felt their hands that they were firm and their lips that they were soft and warm, and they were doubtless alive and real. Then spake one of them and said: Hail our lord! How can words say how we rejoice in thy coming this happy morn! Now do all we give ourselves to thee as thy slaves to do as thou wilt with. Yet we pray thee be merciful to us and our longings.

Therewith all the sort of them knelt down on the grass before Birdalone and joined their hands as praying to her. And Birdalone was full ill at ease, and wotted not where she was. But she said: Hail! and good days and fulfilment of wishes unto you, fair damsels! But tell me, is this the Isle of Kings, as I deemed; for strange it is for me to see ye womenfolk here?

Said she who had spoken afore: Yea verily this is the Isle of Kings; but long ago are the kings dead, and yet they sit dead in the great hall of the castle yonder, as thou mayst see if thou, who art a man and a valiant warrior, durst follow up yon mountain path thereto; but we, weak women and little-hearted, durst not go anigh it; and we tremble when whiles a-nights cometh down thence the sound of clashing swords and clattering shields, and the cries of men in battle. But, praise be to the God of Love, nought cometh down from thence unto us. Therefore do we live peaceful lives and pleasant here, lacking nought but thee, lord; and lo now thou hast come unto us, and we are happy in our inmost hearts.

Now was Birdalone perplexed and knew not what to do; but at last she said: Gentle maidens, I pray you pardon me, but I must depart straightway; for I have an errand, and life or death lieth on it. In all else than my abiding here may ye have your will.

Therewith did she move a little way toward her ferry; but forthwith all they brake out weeping and wailing and lamenting, and some of them came

up to Birdalone and cast themselves down before her, and clasped her knees, and took hold of her skirts, and besought her piteously to abide with them. But she put them aside as well as she might, and stepped aboard the Sending Boat, and stood amidst it waiting on their departure; but they went not, and stood along on the lip of the land crying out and beseeching with much clamour.

Then Birdalone waxed somewhat wrath at their noise and tumult, and she drew forth her knife and bared her arm and let blood from it. But when they saw the whiteness and roundness of it, and how fine and sleek it was, straightway they changed their tune, and cried out: A woman, a woman, a fool of a woman! and they laughed in scorn and mockery. And the speaker of them said: Now there is but one thing for thee to do, and that is to come forth from thy boat and strip off thy stolen raiment, and we shall make thee as fine as ourselves, and thou shalt come with us, and with us abide the coming of our lord. Nay, thou art so fair and lovely, that thou shalt be the Lady and Queen of us, and we will do after thy commands, and thou mayst chastise us if we fail therein. But now if thou wilt not come forth of the boat uncompelled, we shall pluck thee forth of it.

And therewith she set her foot on the gunwale of the boat, and two or three others did the like. But now had Birdalone her sword naked in her hand, and she waxed as red as blood, and cried out: Forbear I bid you! Yea verily I am a woman; but I will not take this offer either, whereas I have

an errand, as I told you. And so stern it is, that if ye now let my departure I will not spare to smite with this sword whoso first cometh aboard my ferry, and though I be not a man, yet shall ye find that in this matter I shall be little worse, whereas I am armed and ye be naked.

Then they drew back and stood gibing and jeering at her; but she heeded it no whit, but reddened stem and stern of the Sending Boat, and sang her spell, and forth glided the ferry, while the damsels stood and stared astonished. As for Birdalone, as she sped on her way she might not refrain her laughter. Thus she wended the wet highway.

CHAPTER XII. BIRDALONE COMETH AGAIN TO THE ISLE OF QUEENS, AND FINDETH A PERILOUS ADVENTURE THEREIN.

IT was not yet daybreak when Birdalone came ashore again, and the moon was down, and it was dark; wherefore she durst not go up on the land, but lay down in the ferry and fell asleep there. When she woke again it was broad daylight, the sun was up, and a little ripple was running over the face of the water. She stepped ashore straightway, and looked up the land and to the right hand and the left, and saw at once that it was indeed the Isle of Queens, and the house stood trim and lovely as of old time; then she longed somewhat to tread the green meadow a little, for yet young was the day, and she saw nought stirring save the throstle and a few small beasts. However, she said to herself that she would go nowhere nigh to the goodly house wherein abode those images of death. Yet her body longed so sore for the springtide freshness of the grass, and was so bewooed of the flowery scent thereof, that though she durst not go unarmed, she did off her footgear and went stealing softly barefoot and with naked legs over the embroidered greensward, saying aloud to herself: If run for the ferry I needs must, lighter shall I run so dight.

Nonetheless, she had gone but a little way ere a terror took hold of her, though she saw no child of Adam anigh, and she turned and ran back swiftly

to her old place and sat down under a twisted oak-tree hard by the Sending Boat, and abode there panting and quaking, and scarce daring to look up from the grass for a while. Then her heart came back to her, and she laughed, and said to herself: I am a fool, for I need fear nought on this Isle of Queens save women like myself.

Yet she sat there a little while longer without stirring; then she stood up and looked keenly around, and, as aforesaid, exceeding far-sighted she was; but still she saw neither man nor maid nor suckling child.

Then her eyes sought the lips of the lake, and rested on a little bight some stone's throw ahead of the Sending Boat, where, a little back from the water, slim willows made a veil betwixt the water of the meadow; and she looked, and saw how pleasant a place it were for a one to stand and look on the ripple just left, while the water dripped from the clear body on to the grass. And her bare feet fell to telling her clad sides of the sweet coolness of the water, and waited for no naysay, but lightly bore her toward the willowy bight. And when she was there, she did off her sallet and ungirt her, and laid her sword on the grass, and did off her surcoat and hauberk, and so was a woman again in one white coat above her smock. Then she looked heedfully betwixt the willow-boughs, and saw no more than before, nought but a little whitethorn brake, now white indeed with blossom, some fifty yards landward from where she stood. So she laughed, and did off her other raiment, and slid

swiftly into the water, that embraced her body in all its fresh kindness; and as for Birdalone, she rewarded it well for its past toil by sporting and swimming to her full.

Then she came forth from the water, and clad herself in no great haste, and did on her hauberk and sallet and sword, and so went back to her place, and sat down and began to do on her foot-gear.

But as she looked up from her work a moment, lo! a tall man coming toward her, and just about the willows whereby she had bathed. Her heart beat quick and her face changed, yet she hastened, and was shod and stood up in knightly array by then he stayed his steps some five paces from her, and gave her the sele of the day in courteous wise; and she strove to think that he had not seen her, or at least noted her otherwise dight; yet her heart misgave her.

He was a grizzled-haired man of over fifty summers by seeming, but goodly enough and well-knit; he was clad in a green coat more than a little worn, but made after the fashion of knighthood; he had nought on his head but an oak-chaplet, and no weapons but a short sword by his side and a stout staff in his hand.

She gave back his greeting in a quavering voice; and he said: Welcome again, young man. Art thou come to dwell with us? Truly thou art trim now, but ere some few months thine attire will be not so much fairer than ours, and thine hauberk will be rusted, for here be no joyous tiltings nor deeds of arms, and no kind ladies to give the award

of honour, so that if we fight amongst ourselves it will be because we have fallen out, and spitefully. Yet (and he laughed, mockingly, as she thought) thou mayst bring us luck, and draw some fair damsels unto us, for that is what we await in this isle, which is barren of their fair bodies, despite of its deceitful name.

Thereat Birdalone reddened, deeming that he divined her womanhood, but she enforced her to speak hardily, and as manly as she might, and said: Yea, fair sir, and if I be the God of Love, as thou deemest, and not merely a poor squire (Louis Delahaye, at thy service), how many damsels shall I send thee if there must needs be one to each man of you? Quoth he: Thou must make up the tale to a score or more, or some of us must lack. Sooth to say, at this time thou needest not haste overmuch for all the tale, whereas there is but one other of the company near at hand, a mere foolish young man; the others are gone to the leeward side of the isle, to fetch us venison and fish, both of which are more plenty there than here; wherefore are we two somewhat lonesome in this stead, all the more as we be over-nigh to the sorcery in the great house, which we durst not enter; for though nought cometh out thence down unto us, yet hear we a-night-tides, first songs, and then cries and shrieking, come out therefrom.

Then he stayed his speech, and drew a little nigher to Birdalone, and then grinned, and said: Forsooth we can spare him, we twain. And he looked on her hard, and the colour came into her

cheeks, and she laughed uneasily, as a dainty lady when she heareth some unmeet tale.

But again the old carle drew nigher to her, and said: Thou seemest to have a good bow and store of arrows; if thou wouldst lend them to me for a little, and come with me into the wood hard by, I might shoot thee some venison with little toil to thee; whereas, forsooth, thou lookest scarce like one who is meet for over-much toil. Again she reddened, and spake nought this time; and he said: Deem not there be no deer this end of the isle because I said that the others were gone to fetch home venison; only the deer be tamer there and more, and we have but evil shooting-gear, whereas thou art well found therein. Wilt thou not come? we shall have merry feast after the hunt.

Now had Birdalone come to her wits again, and she answered like a merry youth, with a flavour of mockery in her speech: Fair sir, thou shalt not deem that I need much help in slaying the dun deer; for I do thee to wit that I shoot not ill in the bow; neither am I heavy-footed. But I will not hunt in your park to-day, for I have an errand which calleth me away, so that I shall depart hence presently. Besides, wise elder, there is thine errand to see to; and if I be the God of Love, as thou sayest, I must not keep thee and thy valiant fellows languishing mateless; so with thy leave I will now depart, that I may send you a score of fair damsels for your company.

And she turned about and made a step toward her boat; but the carle drew nearer, laughing; and

he said: Truly sayest thou that thou art not heavy-footed, for never saw I feet lighter or fairer than glided over the meadow e'en now; nor a fairer body than came like rosy-tinted pearl fresh out of the water while I lay hidden in yonder thorn-brake that while. Wherefore trouble not thyself to bring any more damsels than thyself, fairest Goddess of Love, for thou art enough for me.

And therewith he ran forward, and stretched out a hand to her; but in that nick of time had she her sword naked in her hand, and the carle drew back before the glitter thereof, and cried out: Ho, ho! is it to be battle, my mistress? Deemest thou that thou wilt slay me as lightly as the dun deer, and thou with thy bow unstrung at thy back? Now shall I show thee a trick of fence; but fear not that I shall hurt thee to spoil thee.

He advanced on her with his staff aloft, and her heart failed her, and she quaked, and lightly he beat down her guard and did the sword out of her hand; and again he turned on her to take her, but she sprang aside and ran from him, but ran landward perforce, as he was betwixt her and the boat; and he followed heavily, and had nought to do in the race.

But she had not gone a two-score yards ere she heard a great shout, and another man came running over the meadow; a slim young man was this, and worse of attire than the old carle, for so tattered was his raiment that he was half naked; but he was goodly of fashion, fresh-coloured and black-haired. Birdalone stayed her feet when she saw him, for

though she doubted not to outrun him, yet whither should she run, since her ferry was behind her?

So the young man came up to her, and the old carle met him all panting, and the young man said: How now, Antony! what battle is this? and wherefore art thou chasing this fair knight? And thou, fair sir, why fleest thou this grey dastard?

Said Antony: Thou art but a young fool, Otter, this is no man, but a woman, and I have taken her, and she is mine.

Well, said Otter, I say she is as much mine as thine; nay, more, if she will give herself unto me. But if she will not, she shall go whither she will in thy despite. Or art thou a woman?

Yea, yea, said Birdalone; and I pray thee, by thy mother's head, suffer me to depart; for heavy and full of need is the errand that I am about.

Go thou shalt then, said Otter; lead back to thy place, and I will walk with thee. So did they: and Birdalone went beside the young man quaking; but he put out no hand unto her; and sooth to say, she deemed that she had seldom seen so fair a young man, but it were Arthur or Hugh.

Now he, as Antony, was girt with a short sword, but he let it be in its sheath; and as they went, Antony drew his blade again, and hove it up to smite Otter, but as it befell Birdalone saw him, and turned round sharp upon him and gat hold of his wrist, and therewith Otter turned also, and caught the old carle by the nape as he turned away, and put a foot before his and shoved mightily, so that he went noseling to the earth.

Then turned Otter about again, laughing, and he said to Birdalone: By Saint Giles! thou art well-nigh too valiant for a woman, and I would that we two might be together; and then between us we might achieve the adventure of the dead ladies up yonder. She hung her head, and said: Fair sir, it may not anywise be; yet I thank thee, I thank thee.

So came they to the water-side and the Sending Boat, and Birdalone stayed her feet there, and the young man said: What is this keel, that seemeth unto me as if it were a ferry for malefactors wending to a death of torment, so grey and bleared and water-logged and sun-bleached as it is, and smeared over with stains of I know not what?

Said Birdalone: Such as it is, it is my ferry over the water to where I would be. Strange! said Otter; to my mind it is like to our fortunes on this isle, we who were once knights and merry squires and are now as gangrel men, and of ill conditions, thinking of nought save our first desires, even those which we share with the wolf and the kite.

She said: But art thou of evil conditions, thou who hast just delivered me from trouble? He smiled grimly: Damsel, said he, I have not delivered thee yet from me, though I have from him. But tell me, art thou a sorceress? Not a black one, said Birdalone; but I will tell thee at once that I have been bred by a witch most mighty, and some deal of lore have I learned. And therewith she told him of the Sending Boat, and how she would have to speed it on the way.

He looked on her a little and then turned away, and saw her sword lying on the grass; so he went to it and picked it up and brought it to her, and said: Thou mayst yet need this keen friend. So she took it and thrust it back into the scabbard, quaking somewhat because of him; so feeble and frail as she felt before him. Then he said: If thou deemest thou hast somewhat to reward me for, I have a boon to ask of thee, and granting that, we shall be quits again. Yea, she said faintly, and what is the boon? He said: Art thou pressed to depart now, this minute? Nay, said Birdalone, not for an hour if there be no peril here from other men, and . . . and . . . And if I be true to thee and will let thee go? said he, laughing; hah! is that not thy word? fear not, I swear by thine eyes that thou shalt depart whenso thou wilt. Now then, the boon I crave is, that thou wilt sit down here beside me and tell me the tale of thy life that has been. Said she: It wearies me to think thereof; yet hast thou a right to crave somewhat of me, and this is not hard to grant.

And she sat down by him; but he said: Do this also for me, take off thine headpiece, since now that we know thee for a woman it serveth thee nought. So did she, and began her tale straightway, and told him all thereof, save as to the wood-wife, and he sat hearkening and watching her face; and when she had made an end, he said: Now shall I ask none other boon of thee, though I long sore for it; but best it is that we sunder straightway, else maybe I might yet be for hindering thee.

Therewith he stood up, and Birdalone also, and he looked on her eagerly, and said: I am now to bid thee farewell, and it is most like that I shall never see thee again, wherefore I will ask thee yet to let one thing come from thy mouth; for I deem thee the dearest of all women I have ever seen. What shall I say? said Birdalone, smiling on him kindly; must thou needs put the word in my mouth? Thou hast been friendly with me here when need was to me of friendliness; wherefore I say, I would I might see thee again, and thou better bestead than now thou art.

The young man's face brightened, and he said: Spake I not that thou wert the dearest of all? This was even the word I would have put in thy mouth. But now see thou, one goeth on from one thing to another, and I must now ask thee, is there aught which thou hast a mind to give me ere I depart, some keepsake which I durst not ask for?

She flushed red and said: I will with a good heart give thee my bow and arrows for a keepsake; whereas the old carle told me that ye be ill furnished of shooting-gear.

And she would have taken her bow from her back, but he laughed aloud, and said: Nay, nay, I will not have that; for there be those who gird them to a sword and know not how to use it, but few will cumber their shoulders with bow and quiver who cannot shoot therewith; I deem it like that thou art a fell bowman. Keep thy bow therefore, and if thou wilt go without any other gift, even so be it.

And he made as if he would turn away; but she put forth both her hands and took his in them, and lifted up her face and kissed him kindly, and then turned away to her ferry; while Otter stood still and said in a merry voice: Now is it better than well, for thou art in all ways what I would have thee, and there is nought like unto thee. And therewith he turned away and departed ere Bird-alone had stepped into the Sending Boat, and she blushing like a rose the while. Then she did due sacrifice to the wight of the witch-ferry, and sped on her way without any hindrance.

CHAPTER XIII. COMING TO THE ISLE OF THE YOUNG AND THE OLD, BIRDALONE FINDETH IT PEOPLED WITH CHILDREN.

AMIDST all this had worn some hours, but yet it was barely noon; wherefore it was yet dark by then Birdalone made the Isle of the Young and the Old; so she stepped out of the boat, and lay down on the grass and abode the dawn sleeping. And she awoke with the clatter of shrill voices, and she rose up and looked, and lo a multitude of children all about her, both men and women children, and, as it seemed, from five years old upward to fifteen. They cried and crowed merrily when they saw her stand up, and pressed on her to see her the nearer and to touch her hands or her raiment. They were but little clad, and the younger ones not at all, but were goodly younglings and merry. So great was the noise they raised, that loud were the thunder which had not been hushed thereby; and Birdalone stood looking on them, smiling, and knew not what to do. Anon she turned to a tall thin lad of some fifteen winters, and said unto him: Wilt thou now take me unto the house, and the place where dwelleth the old man? Quoth he: I neither know of an old man, nor rightly what it means, the word. Am not I old enough for thee? I am the oldest of these here. But belike thou art hungry; wherefore if thou come to the place where we sleep a-nights, and where we shelter us from the storm and the

rain when need is, I will give thee to eat; for we have both bread and milk and cheese, and raisins of the sun.

So he took her hand and led her along, and asked her by the way concerning her armour and weapons, and of the fashion of battle, and she told him thereof what she would.

Thus came they to the place where erst had been the cot under the ruin of the great ancient house; but now was gone all that ruin and the great grey walls, though the cot was left; and all about it were low bowers built of small wood and thatched undeftly. But the lad smiled when he saw it, as if the sight thereof made him happy; and he said: All these have we made since I have dwelt here, and no other home have I known.

And he led her into the cot, and set her down to eat and to drink, and through the open door she could see the children swarming, and they that were nighest thrusting each other this way and that to catch a sight of her.

Now she said: Fair child, how gattest thou this victual if there be no older folk to help you? Said he: We dig the ground and sow it, and the wheat comes up, and we reap it in harvest, and make bread of it; and we have goats and kine, and we milk them, and turn the milk with a little blue flower, which is fair to see. And there are in this isle little hills where the grapes grow plenty; and some we eat and some we dry for store. Lo thou, such be our ways for victual. But tell me, said he, thou sayest old, and I know not the word; art

thou old? She laughed: Not very, said she, yet older than thou.

Said the lad: Thou art fair and dear to look on, and thy voice is sweet; wilt thou not abide with us, and teach us what it is to be old? Nay, said she, I may not, for I have an errand which driveth me on; wherefore I must be gone within this hour.

Forsooth, she was growing eager now to be done with her journey and come to the House under the Wood, whatever should befall her there. Moreover she deemed it would not be restful to her to abide among all these restless children, with their ceaseless crying and yelping: if rest she might, she would rest, she deemed, in the Isle of Increase Unsought, if there were no ill things abiding there.

Wherefore now she arose, when she had sat hearkening the sound of the lad's prattle for a while, for as to the sense thereof she might not heed it over-much. The youngling would not leave her, but led her, holding her hand, down to her ferry again; she kissed him in thanks for his meat, and he reddened thereat but said nought. All the whole rout of little ones had followed her down to the water, and now they stood, as thick as bees on a honeycomb, on the bank, to watch her departure. But if they were keen to see her doings before, how much keener were they when it came to the baring of her arm and the smearing of the Sending Boat. To be short, so keen were they, and pushed and shoved each other so sturdily, that more than one or two fell into the water,

and Birdalone was frighted lest they should drown; but they swam like ducks, and got on to the land when they would, which was not so very soon, for some of them hung unto the gunwale of the boat, and hove their faces up to look over into it, and left not hold till the ferry was fairly under weigh and beginning to quicken its speed.

So left Birdalone the isle, and nought befell her on the way to the Isle of Increase Unsought.

CHAPTER XIV. THE SENDING BOAT DISAPPEARETH FROM THE ISLE OF INCREASE UNSOUGHT, AND BIRDALONE SEEKETH TO ESCAPE THENCE BY SWIMMING.

IT was as before that Birdalone came to the shore of the isle while it was yet night; but the wizard keel was so loathsome to her, that she stepped out of it and laid her down on the land for what was left of the night; yet hard she found her bed, and neither grassy nor flowery.

For all that, she slept, for she was weary, and it was broad day and not very early when she awoke. She stood up trembling, for she foreboded evil, so near as she was to the dwelling of her old mistress; and she looked up to where in time past was the fair and wicked house, and saw that all was changed indeed; for no longer was the isle goodly with meadow and orchard and garden, but was waste and bare, and nought grew on it save thin and wiry grass, already seeding even ere June was born, and here and there hard and ugly herbs, with scarce aught that might be called a flower amongst them. Trees there were yet, but the most of them stark dead, and the best dying fast. No beasts she saw, nor fowl; nothing but lizards and beetles, and now and again a dry grey adder coiled up about a sun-burned stone. But of great carrion flies, green and blue, were there a many, and whiles they buzzed about her head till she sickened with loathing of them. All this she found on her way as

she went up toward the place where erst was the great perron. But when she came to the top there was no sign either of the stairs or the house, or aught that ever was builded; there was nought but the bare bent top, ungrassed, parched by wind, scorched by sun, washed by rain.

She wandered about the isle, to places where she had not been herself, but which she deemed she might have known by the telling of the Green Knight's tale, had there been no change since those days; but now was all changed, and the whole isle was a mere waste, and withal poisonous of aspect to her mind, as if many corpses lay underneath the wretched stones of it. Nevertheless, though it seemed so evil unto Birdalone, she lingered on it, wandering about till she was to-wearied, for she had no will to depart at such time as she would be like to come to her old abiding-place by night and cloud; wherefore she dallied with the time, and came not back to the haven of her ferry till it was nigh sunset, and the westering sun was in her eyes when she came there; and she said to herself that this was the cause why she might not see the Sending Boat.

So she cleared her eyes and looked on the thin grass awhile, and then down over the edge of the land, and still she saw not her boat. She turned pale, and a pang of anguish went to her heart; but she walked a little east, deeming that perchance she had erred as to the place of the haven on that dull and empty shore; but yet there was no boat. Then she turned back wild with terror, and sought where

erst she had missed it, and found neither boat nor the world's end. And she deemed that there might be some devilish malice of the wight of the Sending Boat, to torment her with fear, and she walked along the land's edge up and down, and down and up, further each time, and still there was no boat.

Then she stood still and strove to think, and might not, nor might she do aught, but spread abroad her hands and moaned in her agony; for now indeed she felt herself in the trap; and she said that all her past life of hope and desire and love and honour was all for nought, and that she was but born to die miserably in that foul ruin of an isle envenomed with the memories of bygone cruelty and shame.

But in a little while she came somewhat to herself, and she said: At least this hideous land shall not mock my dying anguish; I will give myself to the water and let it do with me as it will.

Therewith she cast off her helm and hauberk first, and her weapons, and her pouch with the treasure that could buy nought for her now, and thereafter all her raiment, till she was as naked as when she first came aland there that other time. Again she moaned, and put up her hand to her bosom and felt a little gold box lying there betwixt the fragrant hills of her breasts, which hung to a thin golden thread about her neck; and a thought came into her mind, and she stooped adown and drew from her pouch flint and fire-steel, and then opened the said golden box and drew thence the tress which Habundia the wood-wife had given to

her those years agone, and all trembling she drew two hairs from it, as erst she did on the Isle of Nothing, and struck fire and kindled tinder and burnt the said hairs, and then hung the golden box with the tress therein about her neck again; and she said: O wood-mother, if only thou couldst know of me and see me, thou wouldst help me!

Thereafter she sought along the bank for bread which she had taken from her store that morning, and she found it, and compelled herself to eat of it for the strengthening of her body, and then she stood and abode tidings; and by then the sun had just sunk below the rim of the lake, and the stars began to twinkle, for the night was cloudless, and exceeding fair, and very warm.

No visible token came to her, but her heart grew stronger, and she seemed to see herself yet alive and in hope on the other side of the water; and she said: Who wotteth what Weird may do, or where the waters may bear me? and there is no swimmer stronger than I.

So then without more ado Birdalone slipped into the water, which lay before her as calm and plain as a great sheet of glass, and fell to rowing with her arms and her legs as though she were but swimming from Green Eyot to the mainland, as so oft she had done in the other days.

CHAPTER XV. BIRDALONE LACKETH LITTLE OF DROWNING, BUT COMETH LATTERLY TO THE GREEN EYOT.

ON swam Birdalone, not as one who had a mind to drown her for the forgetting of troubles, but both strongly and wisely; and she turned over on to her back, and looked on the stars above her, and steered herself by them thitherward whereas she deemed was the land under the wood. When she had been gone from the evil isle for an hour or so, there rose a fair little wind behind her, which helped her forward, but scarce raised the water more than a little ripple.

Still she swam on, and it was some three hours ere she began to weary, and then she floated on her back and let the wind and water have its way with her; and now the night was as dark as it would be ere dawn.

Thus it went for another hour, that whiles she swam on and whiles she floated; and now her heart began to fail her, and the great water was no longer unto her a wet highway, but a terrible gulf over which she hung fainting.

Nevertheless she did not give up doing what she might: she floated supine a long while, and then, when she had gathered a little strength, turned over again and struck out, still steering her by the stars. But she had scarce made three strokes ere her arms met something hard and rough; and at first in her forlornness she deemed she had happened on some

dread water monster, and for terror of it she sank down into the deep, but came up presently blinded and breathless, and spread abroad her arms, and again they came on the thing aforesaid, and this time found that it was nought alive, but the bole of a tree sitting high out of the water. So she clomb up on to it with what might she had left, and sat her down, and saw in the dim light that it was big, and that there was a fork betwixt two limbs reaching up into the air, and she thrust herself in between these two limbs and embraced one of them, so that she might scarce tumble off; and a great content and happiness came over her that she had thus escaped from the death of the deep; but therewithal weariness overcame her, and she slept, whether she would or not; and the bole went on over the waters no slower than might have been looked for, whether it were by the pushing on of the south wind, or by the hand of Weird that would not have her die.

Long she slumbered, for when she awoke it was broad day and the sun was shining high in the heavens, and she cleared her eyes and looked around, and saw before her the land, but yet blue in the offing. And the tree-bole was yet speeding on towards the shore, as if it were being drawn there by some bidding of might.

Now indeed grew Birdalone happy, and she thought if any had helped her it must have been the wood-mother once again; and she said to herself that she should soon meet with that helper; nor heeded she that she was naked and unfurnished of any goods, whereas she deemed indeed that it was but to ask and have of her friend.

For a while indeed she knew not whither she was wending, and if her face were verily turned toward the land under the wood; but as the morning wore the blue distance began to grow green, and then she saw that a great wood was indeed before her, and thereafter, as it cleared yet more, she knew the land she was nearing for the meadows of the House under the Wood, and it was not long thence ere she saw clear and close Green Eyot and Rocky Eyot, though the house was yet hidden from her by the green shores of the first of those two isles.

Shortly to tell it, her tree-bole floated with her past the outer ness of Green Eyot, and came ashore in that same sandy bight where erst she was wonted to make her body ready for the water. She stepped ashore all glad to feel the firm warm sand underneath her foot-soles, and as one drunk with joy she was when the tall flowery grass of the latter May was caressing her legs as they shook the seed-dust off the bents, and smote the fragrance out of the blossoms; and she might scarce at first lift her eyes from their familiar loveliness. Glad she was indeed, but exceeding worn and weary with the long voyage, and all the longing and fear and hope which had encompassed her that while. She lifted up her eyes but once, and saw the witch's house standing where it was wont, but no shape of man moving about it; then she turned aside to a little brake of thorn and eglantine in the meadow hard by, and laid her down on the grass in the shade thereof, and almost before her head touched the ground she fell asleep, and slept there long and peacefully.

CHAPTER XVI. BIRDALONE FINDETH HER WITCH-MISTRESS DEAD.

IT was some while after noon when she wakened, and the sun was shining bright and hot. Somewhat she felt the burden of fear upon her, even before she was fully come to herself, and knew not what it was that she feared; but when she called to mind that it was even the meeting with her old mistress, her flesh quaked indeed with the memory of bygone anguish, but valiantly she arose and faced the dwelling of the witch despite her naked helplessness. As she went she looked up unto it, and saw no smoke coming from the chimney, but marvelled little thereat since it was not yet cooking-time and the weather hot. She drew nigher, and saw someone sitting on the bench without the door whereas the witch was wonted; and her heart beat quick, for she saw presently that it was none other than her mistress. Moreover, near to her stood three of the milch-kine lowing uneasily and as in reproach, even as such beasts use when their udders be full and they desire to be milked.

Birdalone stayed a minute, and her legs nigh failed her for fear, and then because of the very fear she hastened on till she came within ten paces of the said witch; and sore she missed her bow and arrows, and the cutting blade of her feigned squire-hood, lest the carline should arise and come raging and shrieking at her.

Then spake Birdalone in no feeble voice, and said: Dame, I am come back unto thee, as thou

seest, in even such plight as I fled from thee; and I have a mind to dwell in this land: what sayest thou? The witch neither moved nor spake at her word; and the kine, who had held silence when she first came up, and had turned from her, fell to their peevish lowing again.

Birdalone drew a step nigher, and said: Dost thou hear me, dame, or art thou exceeding wroth with me, and art pondering what vengeance thou wilt take on me? Still no answer came from the carline, and the kine kept on lowing now and again. Once more Birdalone drew nigher, and spake loudly and said: Tell me at least, is it peace between us or unpeace?

But now when she looked she saw that the eyes of the witch were open and staring, and her lips white, and her hands hard writhen; and she cried out and said: Is she dead? or will she waken presently and beat me? surely she is dead. And she put forth her hand and touched her face, and it was stone-cold; and she found that she was dead beyond any question.

Then was a great weight lifted off her heart, and she turned about and looked on the meadows and up to the trees of the wood and down to the rippling stream before her, and fair and sweet and joyous were they gotten unto her; and she looked at the kine who were drawing up towards her, and she laughed merrily, and went to the out-house hard by and took forth a milking-pail and a stool and fell to milking them one after the other, and the beasts went off down the meadow lowing in a changed voice,

for joy to wit, this time. But Birdalone knelt down and drank a long draught of the sweet warm milk, and then arose and went swiftly into the house, and saw nought changed or worsened so far as she could see. There was her own bed in the corner, and the mistress's, greater and much fairer, over against it; and the hutch by the door wherein the victual was kept: she opened it now, and found three loaves there on the shelf, and a meal-tub down below, and she took a loaf and broke it and fell to eating it as she walked about the chamber. There was her bow standing in a nook beside the hutch, and the quiver of arrows hanging on the wall above it. There was the settle lying athwart from the hearth; and she smiled, and fitted her wrists to the back of the carven bear which made its elbow, whereto the witch was wont to tie them when she chastised her.

Then she went to the coffers that stood against the wall behind it, and threw up the lid of one of them, and found therein a smock or two of her own, yellowed by the lapse of time, and her old grey coat, ragged as it was when last she wore it, and now somewhat moth-eaten withal; and she drew forth both smocks and coat and laid them on the settle. Then she opened another coffer, and therein were gay and gaudy gowns and gear of the witch's wear; but lying amongst them, as if the witch had worn them also, her green gown and shoon which her own hands had broidered. But she said: Nay, ye have been in ill company, I will wear you not, though ye be goodly, at least not till ye have been fumigated and hallowed for me.

Therewith she turned back to the settle and did on her her old smock and her ragged grey coat, and said: To-day at least will these be good enough for to-day's work. And she knit her brow withal, and walked with a firm step out-a-doors and stood a while gazing on the dead corpse of her enemy; and she thought how that here was that which once was so great a thing unto her for the shaping of her life-days, and which so oft came to her waking thoughts after she had escaped from her hands, (though, as aforesaid, she seldom dreamed of her a-night-time), and moreover an hour ago she yet feared it so sore that she scarce might stand for the fear of it; and now it was nought but a carven log unto her.

But she told herself that the work was to be done; so she dragged the body away thence, and across the brook, and a little way into the meadow, and then she went back and fetched mattock and spade from the outhouse, where she knew they lay, and so fell to digging a grave for the corpse of her dead terror. But howso hard she might toil, she was not through with the work ere night began to fall on her, and she had no mind to go on with her digging by night. Wherefore she went back into the house, and lighted candles, whereof was no lack, and made her supper of the bread and the milk; and then sat pondering on her life that had been till the passion arose in her bosom, and the tears burst out, and long she wept for desire of others and pity for herself. Then she went to the bed she had been erst wont to, and laid her down and fell asleep.

And her mistress walked not, nor meddled with her peace; nor did Birdalone so much as dream of her, but of her mother and Master Jacobus in the fair city of the Five Crafts; and in her sleep she wept for thinking of them.

CHAPTER XVII. BIRDALONE LAYETH TO EARTH THE BODY OF THE WITCH, AND FINDETH THE SENDING BOAT BROKEN UP.

WHEN morning was, Birdalone awoke, and felt a weight upon her heart, and called to mind the task which lay before her. So she arose and clad herself, and went straight to the grave begun, and toiled hard till she had digged it out deep, and sithence she dragged the witch thereinto and heaped the earth upon her. Then she bathed her in the nighest pool of the brook, and went back into the house and made her breakfast on the bread and milk, and it was then about mid-morning. Thereafter she went about the house, and saw to the baking of bread, and so out to the meadow to see to the kine and the goats, and then stored the milk for making butter and cheese, and did in all wise as if she were to dwell long in that stead; but thereafter she rested her body, whiles her thought went wide about. But she said to herself that she would not go up to the Oak of Tryst to meet the wood-mother that day, but would abide the night, in case aught befell that she should tell her.

But when the sun was getting low she roused herself and went out, and walked about the meadow, and hearkened to the birds' song, and watched the kine and the goats as they fed down the pasture; and now a soft content came over her, that all this was free unto her to hold in peace, and to take her

pleasure in, as much as one lone child of Adam might do.

At last she wandered down to the sandy bight of the lake and stood gazing on Green Eyot, where the osiers and willows were grown wild and long in all these years, and she said that she would swim over to it on the morrow. But now her feet took her eastward thence toward the haven of the Sending Boat amongst the alders; for in her heart she would fain know if there were any tidings for her.

So she went softly along the path by the water, where she had sped so swiftly that last time, and came at last to the creek-side, and looked down on to the water somewhat timorously. There then she saw what she deemed was the very boat itself lying as she had known it; but when she looked again she saw that it lay from stem to stern all loose staves with the water betwixt, and the thwarts and ribs all sundered and undone, so that never again might it float upon the waves. Then she said in a soft voice: Art thou dead then, as thy mistress is dead? was it not so that thou wert at the point of death, and she also, when thou failedst me at the Isle of Increase Unsought? No voice came to her as she spake; and she said again: Must I then bury thee as I have buried thy mistress? Nay, that will I not until thou compellest me; belike in a short while little of the staves of thee shall be left now that the life is out of thee. Let thy ghost and hers foregather if ye will.

As she spake the last word, she saw a stir about the stern which lay furthest in up the creek, and

while she quaked with failing heart, lo! a big serpent, mouldy and hairy, grey and brown-flecked, came forth from under the stern and went into the water and up the bank and so into the dusk of the alder-wood. Birdalone stood awhile pale and heart-sick for fear, and when her feet felt life in them, she turned and stole away back again into the merry green mead and the low beams of the sun, pondering whether this evil creature were the fetch of the wight who drave the ferry under the blood of the sender.

So she hastened back again to the house, and lit a fire on the hearth, and fell to cooking her somewhat of grout to her supper; and she watched the fire, thinking withal: Now if some poor soul be abroad, they may see the smoke and seek hither, and I may comfort them with food and shelter and converse; or when night darkens, they may see the litten windows and come to me; wherefore shall the fire burn yet and the candles be lighted, for as warm as is the evening, even as if it were Yule-tide and the snow deep without, and the wind howling in the woodland trees. And therewith she wept for longing of them that she loved.

But in a little she dried her tears, and reproached herself for her much softness; and she ate her supper when she had lighted a candle (for it was now dark), and again sat looking at the hearth, till she said: Now am I getting soft again, and who knows but my softness may tempt the ghosts to come in to me. I will give my hands somewhat to do.

Therewith her eye caught sight of the rents and rags of her old grey gown, and she smiled somewhat ruefully as she called to mind her gallant knight's array, which lay now on the shore of the evil and ruined isle; and her goodly attire of the days of the Five Crafts; and the rich raiment wherein her friends of the Castle of the Quest had clad her. Then she arose and sought needle and thread and some remnants of green cloth, and did off the ragged coat and fell to patching and mending it, and so sat at her work in smock-sewing till the night was old and she was weary and sleep overcame her, and she lay down in her bed and slept dreamlessly till the sun was high next morning.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE WOOD-MOTHER COMETH TO BIRDALONE AND HEARETH HER STORY.

NOW Birdalone arose and bathed her and broke her fast, and then went about her work with the beasts and the dairy; but all that time seemed long to her till she had bow in hand and quiver on back, and was wending her way to the Oak of Tryst; and swift were her feet, and her heart beat quick with hope of pleasure.

Forsooth no long tarrying had she, for scarce had she set her down beneath the oak, ere the wood-mother came forth from the thicket even as the first time when Birdalone saw her, and presently she had her arms about Birdalone and was kissing and clipping her. Then they sat down together in the shade of the great tree, and the wood-mother made much of her friend with few words and those but simple, while Birdalone wept for joy.

At last spake Birdalone: Wood-mother, my dear, I look in thy face, and I see thee that thou art nowise changed, so that thou callest to my mind the Birdalone that met thee here when she was straying from the House of Captivity like to a bird with a string to its leg.

Habundia smiled on her and said: So it is that now thou lookest older than I. Rounder and fuller is thy body, and thy limbs greater and fairer, and thy flesh sleeker; lovelier art thou in all wise, and such as I have thought of thee during these years, save that thy face is grown wiser and sadder

than might be looked for. Mother, she said, I am grown older than I should be by the tale of the years, for I have had joy and grief, and grief and joy, and grief again; and now that the years have worn, the grief abideth and the joy hath departed, save this joy of thee and the day of the meeting I have so often thought of.

Said the wood-wife: Were I to hear the story of thee, I deem it most like that I would fain buy thy joy with thy grief, both that which has been and that which is to come. And now I will ask thee right out to tell me all thy tale, as much as thou canst; and all thou canst tell to me, who am thine other self: and I wot moreover that thou hast not told of me to any whom thou hast met in the world since we were last together: is it not so? In faith and in troth so it is, said Birdalone. Said Habundia, after she had looked hard on Birdalone a while: Now there is this I find in thee, that though thou callest me wood-mother still, thou art not my daughter as thou wert erewhile, nor I thy mother; and I know not whether to be glad or sorry thereof, since thou art even as much my friend as ever thou wert. But much do I rejoice herein that thou hast not told any one soul of me.

Said Birdalone: I must tell thee that part of the tale I shall tell thee is how I have found my mother in the flesh, and loved her sorely; and then I lost her again, for she is dead.

Quoth the wood-wife, smiling on her lovingly: Then should I be even more thy mother than erst

I was: there will be something else in thy tale, sweetling.

Then Birdalone flushed very red, and she smiled piteously in Habundia's face; but then she put up her hands to hide the change therein which the anguish of longing wrought, and her shoulders shook and her bosom heaved, and she wept bitterly; but the wood-wife still looked on her smiling, and said softly at last: Yea, how sweet it were to be grieved with thy pain.

But in a while Birdalone grew calm again and the very smile blossomed out in her face, and they kissed together. Then Habundia rose up and looked on her, and said at last and laughed out withal: One thing I must needs say, that thou hast not fetched thee raiment of price from the knighthood and the kings' houses; or have I not seen thy grey coat of old time, while thou wert living amidst the witch's cruelty? Yea forsooth, said Birdalone; thou needest not to ask this. Verily not, said Habundia, nor why thou art not clad in the fair green gown which thou didst broider; for whiles I have seen the witch flaunting it on the wooden ugly body of her, and thou wouldst not wear it after she had cursed it with her foulness. Is it not so? Yea, it is even so, said Birdalone; dost thou love me the less therefor? Habundia laughed again: Were I a man of Adam's sons, said she, I might make thee many words on the seemliness of thy short coat, and the kindness of it, that it will be for ever slipping off one or other of thy shoulders. But now am I at least enough thy mother, and thou art dwelling even

so much in my house, that the next time we meet (and that shall be to-morrow) I shall fetch thee raiment which shall make us forget that thou camest back again to this land as naked as thou didst depart thence.

Birdalone reddened and hung down her head, but the wood-mother sat down beside her and kissed her and said: But now forget all save thy tale, and tell all as closely as thou mayest, for I would lose nought thereof. Yea, said Birdalone; and where shall I begin? Said Habundia: I know nought thereof save the beginning, that thou fledst away naked and escaped the witch; and the ending, to wit, that the Sending Boat failed thee at the last of the Wonder Isles, and that thou calledst on me not wholly in vain, whereas the witch was dead, and therefore there was nought to stay me from sending thee one of my trees and the wight thereof (whom belike I may show to thee one day) to save thee from the bottom of the deep water.

At that word Birdalone threw herself on the wood-wife and clipped and kissed her, and thanked her for the helping with all the dearest words she might. But the wood-mother laughed for joy, and stroked her cheeks and said: Now I deem thee my daughter again, whereas thou thankest me with such sweet passion for doing to thee as a kind mother needs must without any thought thereof. And I bid thee, my dear, never again to go so far from me as that I may not easily help thee and comfort thee from out of my realm wherein I am mighty. And now tell me all in thy dear speech.

Therewith Birdalone began her story without more ado, even as ye have heard it afore. Yea and many more things than we can set down did she tell, for full filled she was with the wisdom of the wood. And between whiles the wood-mother fed her with dainty meat and drink, such as Birdalone had never erst tasted the like of. And by then she had got so far as her flight from the Isle of Increase Unsought, the sun was set and the twilight begun. And the wood-wife said: Now shalt thou go home to thine house; and have no fear of witch or evil thing, for I am not far from thee and will watch over thee. Sweet is thy tale, my daughter, and dear are thy she-friends; and if ever it may be that I may do them any pleasure, fain were I; and that especially to thy Viridis, who meseemeth is both sweet and wise even as thou thyself art. Nay, dost thou begrudge my loving her? Nay, nay, said Birdalone, laughing; but I rejoice in it. And hereafter when I tell thee how sorely they paid for helping me, I will bid thee to love them yet more than now thou dost. Therewith they parted, and Birdalone came to her house; and on the way she made as it were a feigned tale in mockery of her old trouble, that there would be the witch-mistress awaiting her to whip her. So that when she came to the door she was half frighted with her own mock, lest the witch might now at last have taken to walking.

But all was quiet when she entered with the last of the twilight, and she rested that night in all peace, as in the best of her days in the Five Crafts.

CHAPTER XIX. HABUNDIA HIDETH BIRDALONE'S NAKEDNESS WITH FAERY RAIMENT.

NEXT morning Birdalone tarried about the house as little a while as she might, and then went hastening up to the wood; and when she came within sight of the Trysting Tree, lo! there was Habundia before her, and the hands of her busy turning over goodly raiment, so that it was well-nigh as if the days had gone back to the time of the Captivity, and the sitter under the oak was Birdalone herself dealing with her half-finished gown.

Joyously they met and embraced each other, and then spake the wood-wife: Now, thou darling of the world, I have been no worse than my word, and if thou durst wear web of the Faery thou shalt presently be clad as goodly as ever thou wert down there amongst the knighthood; and then thy tale, my dear, and, if it may be, the wisdom of the barren wood-wife set thereto.

And therewith she laid on Birdalone's outstretched arms the raiment she had brought with her, and it was as if the sunbeam had thrust through the close leafage of the oak, and made its shadow nought a space about Birdalone, so gleamed and glowed in shifty brightness the broidery of the gown; and Birdalone let it fall to earth, and passed over her hands and arms the fine smock sewed in yellow and white silk, so that the web thereof seemed of mingled cream and curd; and she

looked on the shoon that lay beside the gown, that were done so nicely and finely that the work was as the feather-robe of a beauteous bird, whereof one scarce can say whether it be bright or grey, thousand-hued or all simple of colour. Birdalone quivered for joy of the fair things, and crowed in her speech as she knelt before Habundia to thank her: then in a twinkling had she done off her beggar's raiment, and then the smock clung about her darling nakedness, and next the gown was shimmering all over her, and the golden girdle embraced her loins as though it loved them worthily; and Birdalone looked to the wood round about her and laughed, while Habundia lay in her place and smiled upon her with gentle loving-kindness.

But in a little while was Birdalone sobered; for the thought of how fair she should look to the eyes of her beloved when she was shown unto him on the day of days, thrust her light and eager pleasure aside; and she took up her shoes from the ground (for she had not done them on), and sat down beside the wood-wife and fell a-toying with the marvel of them; and thus without more ado began her tale again, whereas she had left it last even, when she had told of how the Sending Boat was speeding her over the waters toward the Isle of the Young and the Old.

CHAPTER XX. BIRDALONE TELLETH HABUNDIA OF HER LOVE FOR ARTHUR, AND GETTETH FROM HER PROMISE OF HELP THEREIN.

LONG they sat there that day, and until the sun was down, and by then had Birdalone but little to tell of her story, for she was gotten therein to the days of the Five Crafts. Many times had she wept and turned to Habundia for solace as she told, not without shame, but without any covering up, all the tale of her love for Arthur the Black Squire, and how she was surprised by the love of him, and of his wisdom and grace and loveliness. And the wood-mother was ever as sweet and kind unto her as could be; yet might another than a lover have seen that much of all this was strange unto her, and she looked upon Birdalone as a child who has broken her toy, and is hard to comfort for the loss of it, though there be a many more in the world. But when it grew dusk as aforesaid, and it was time to part, she spake to Birdalone, and said: True it is, my child, that thou hast lived long in these six years' time; neither do I wonder at the increase of thy beauty, and the majesty thereof; for fair is the life thou hast lived, although thou hast been grieved and tormented by it at whiles. And now I know what it is for which thou longest; and herein again will I play the mother unto thee, and seek about to fetch thee that thou wouldst have; so be not over-anxious or troubled; and thou mayest be

good herein, as my fair child should be; for this I have noted in thee, that Love is not so tyrannous a master but that his servants may whiles think of other matters, and so solace their souls, that they may live despite of all.

Now was Birdalone arisen, and stood before her friend confused and blushing. But Habundia put her two hands on her shoulders and kissed her, and said: Go home now and sleep, and come again to-morrow and let us hear the last of thy tale; and when that is done, maybe I shall be able to do something for thine avail.

So they parted, and on the morrow Birdalone came again and told the remnant of her story, which was not so long now that the Black Squire was out of it. And when she had done, Habundia kept silence awhile, and then she said: One thing I will tell thee, that whereas erewhile it was but seldom indeed that any son of Adam might be seen in the woodland here, of late, that is, within the last three years, there be many such amongst us; and to our deeming they be evil beasts, more pitiless and greedy than any bear; and but that we have nought to do with them, for they fear us and flee from us, we should have destroyed them one and all. And now that I have heard all thy story, it seemeth unto me not so unlike but these may be the remnants of the bands of the Red Hold, and that they have drifted hither fleeing before the might of thy friends of the knighthood. Wherefore now, trust me that I will look into this, but I must needs be away from here for a little; so

hold thy soul in patience though thou hear nought of me, and dwell quietly at home for seven days' space, and then come hither and find me, farewell now, my child!

So they kissed and departed; and Birdalone went home to the house, and wore the days thereafter doing what was needful about the stead, and wandering through the meadows, and swimming the waters about Green Eyot; and the days were not unrestful unto her.

CHAPTER XXI. HOW THE WOOD-WIFE ENTERED THE COT, AND A WONDER THAT BEFELL THEREON.

BUT when it was the sixth day since those two had met, Birdalone arose in the morning and stood in the door of the house, and she looked toward the bent which went up to the wood and saw one coming down it, and knew it for Habundia clad in her huntress' raiment and bearing something over the left arm, for her bow was in her right hand. So Birdalone ran to meet her, and embraced and kissed her, and was merry over her, and said: Dear mother, thou farest far from thy fastness to-day. Said Habundia: There is nought in the meadows now save the neat and the goats and thou; of none of that folk am I afraid. But mayhappen thou shalt be afraid to come with me into the depths of the wild-wood, for thither would I lead thee. I will be afraid of nought with thee beside me, said Birdalone. But come now and look upon the house that I have won for me. And she took her hand and led her along; and the wood-wife said no more till they were across the brook and standing by the porch.

Then said Birdalone: Thou hast a green gown over thine arm; is that also for me? Yea, certes, said Habundia; the old rag which thou hast on thee, and which thou lovest so sore, is not fine enough for my company; and the glitter-gown I gave thee may be too fine for the thorns and the briars, and moreover thou mayst be over-easily

seen if thou bear that broidered sunshine mid the boughs. Wherefore go in now and do on this other coat, though the faery have made it, and then come out to me with thy bow and thy quiver, and I shall find thee sandal-shoon and girdle withal.

Nay, wood-mother, said Birdalone, hallow my house by entering it, and eat a morsel with me and drink the wine of the horned folk ere we go our ways.

Habundia shook her head and knit her brows somewhat as she looked hard on the house; then she said: I know not, Adam's daughter; I have little to do with houses, and doubt if a house be safe for me. And this one that the witch builded! and belike she buried some human being at one of its four corners. Tell me, fair child, sawest thou ever here at night-tide the shape of a youngling crowned with a garland straying about the house?

Nay, never at all, said Birdalone. Said the wood-wife: Then maybe thou hast hallowed it with the wisdom and love of thee, and I may venture; and moreover I note that it is all builded of trees and the grass of the earth; and thou art free to use them by my leave. But if aught befall of my coming under thy roof, heed it not too much, but think, whatsoever my aspect may be, I am thy wood-mother and wisdom-mother that loveth thee. And I bid thee also wish with all thy might that my aspect may not change to thee. Also, if I eat, thou wert best not to sign the meat as

Adam's sons are wont. Lead in then; for now am I grown wilful, and will enter whatever betide.

Birdalone marvelled at those words, but she fell to wishing strongly that her friend might not lose her lovely youthful shape either then or ever, and she took her hand, which trembled somewhat, and led her over the threshold; and when they were under the roof herseemed that the wood-mother dwindled in a wondrous way, though her face was as sweet and her limbs as shapely as ever; and she laughed shrilly yet sweetly, and spake in a thin clear voice: Birdalone, my dear, wish strongly, wish strongly! though thou shalt see nothing worse of me than this. And she was scarce three feet high, but as pretty as a picture.

Thereat indeed was Birdalone affrighted, but she wished all she might, and stooped down to kiss this little creature; and therewith again the wood-wife seemed to wax again as great and tall as ever she was, and her voice came full and strong again, as she laughed and said: Now is it all over for this time, and I see how well thou lovest me; and I pray thee love me no less for this wonder thou hast seen in me. But now it were better that I never go under a roof again. And she took her arms about Birdalone and clipped her lovingly; and glad was Birdalone to feel her so strong and solid again.

Then they sat to the board and ate a simple meal of bread and cheese and wood-berries, and drank milk withal; and the wood-mother was merry, and the smiles danced over her face as she looked on Birdalone with all loving-kindness, so

that Birdalone wondered what was toward; but so light-hearted and happy she grew, that she deemed it might be nought save good.

But when they had eaten, then Birdalone did off her old coat, which she said was meet enough for her daily toil, and did on the fair green hunting-gown and the sandal-shoon, and girt her with the fair girdle which Habundia had fetched her, and drew up the laps of her gown therethrough till her legs were all free of the skirts. And Habundia looked on her, and laughed and said: Now are these white and smooth legs as bad as the gleam-gown for the lying hid; but it may no better be, and thou must draw thy skirts down and stumble, if needs must be, when we come to the ambushment.

Birdalone reddened as she laughed at the word, and took down her bow and hung her quiver at her back and thrust her sharp knife into her girdle, and forth they went both of them, and were presently past the bent which went up from the meadows and in amongst Habundia's trees.

CHAPTER XXII. BIRDALONE WENDETH THE WILDWOOD IN FELLOWSHIP WITH HABUNDIA.

NOW as they went their ways lightly through the wood, spake Habundia and said: Birdalone, my child, fair is the gold ring with the sapphire stone that the third finger of thy right hand beareth; seldom have I seen so fair a stone as that deep blue one; hangeth any tale thereby? Said Birdalone: Did I not tell thee thereof, wood-mother, how that my beloved who is lost gave it unto me the very last time I saw him, woe worth the while? Nay, said Habundia, I mind not the tale. But deemest thou he would know it again if he saw it? Yea, surely, said Birdalone, hanging her head; for when first he gave it, the gift was not to me, but to another woman. And she held her peace, and went on with hanging head and all the glee faded out of her a while.

At last she turned to Habundia, and said: I have now bethought me to ask thee whither we be going and on what errand; for at first I was so glad at heart, I know not why, and it was so merry to be wending the wood with thee freely, that I had no thought in me as to whither and wherefore. But now wilt thou tell me?

Said the wood-wife: How if I were to tell thee we were going a-hunting? Birdalone said: Then I should ask thee what like the quarry were. And suppose it were men? said the wood-wife. Birdalone turned somewhat pale. My mother, she

said, if we be going against some of those men of the Red Bands, I am not happy over it. I am no warrior, and fear strokes. Said Habundia, laughing: Yet art thou a fell archer; and thou mayest shoot from an ambush of the thick leaves, since June is in to-day. But neither would I slay or hurt any man, said Birdalone, but it were to save me from present death.

Habundia looked on her with a sly smile and said: Well maybe though we take cover and get within wind of our quarry thou shalt not need to speed an arrow to him. Have patience therefore. For this is a strange beast which I have marked down; he is not ill to look on, and his voice, which we may well hearken, for whiles he singeth, is rather sweet than surly. What meanest thou, mother? said Birdalone, growing red and then paler yet; what man is it? since thy calling him a beast is a jest, is it not?

Nay, said Habundia, I neither name him nor know him; only I deem him by no means to be one of the Red Band. For the rest, he may be a man in a beast's skin, or a beast in a man's skin, for aught I know; whereas he seems, so far as I have seen him, to be not wholly man-like or wholly beast-like. But now let us hold our peace of him till we be come nigher to his haunt.

So they went on their way, and Birdalone said but little, while the wood-wife was of many words and gay. They made all diligence, for Birdalone was not soon wearied, and moreover as now she was anxious and eager to see what would befall,

which she might not but deem would be something great.

They went without stay till past noon, when they were come to a little shady dale wherethrough ran a clear stream; there they rested and bathed them, and thereafter sat under the boughs and ate the dainty meat which the wood-wife provided, howsoever she came by it; and when they had rested a while, the wood-wife turned the talk once more unto Arthur the Black Squire, and would have Birdalone tell her all nicely what manner of man he was; and Birdalone was nothing loth thereto; for had she her will she had talked of him day-long.

CHAPTER XXIII. THE WOOD-WIFE BRINGETH BIRDALONE TO THE SIGHT OF ARTHUR IN THE WILD-WOOD.

NOW they go on again, no less speedily than before, and rest but little, until it was hard on an hour before sunset. And now Habundia began to go warily, as if they were come anigh to their journey's end and the thing that they sought. They were come by now to a long bent of the forest well grown with big-boled oak-trees, not very close together, so that short fine greensward was all underneath them; and Habundia went heedfully from bole to bole, as if she would be ready to cover herself if need were; and Birdalone went after her, and was now flushed of face, and her eyes glittered, and her heart beat fast, and her legs trembled under her, as she went running from tree to tree.

So came they nigh to the crown of the bent, and before them were the oak-trees sparser and smaller as they went down the further side, which seemed by their sudden shortening to be steeper than the hither side; and betwixt them showed the topmost of thorn and whitebeam and logwood, intertwined with eglantine and honeysuckle and the new shoots of the traveller's joy. There the wood-wife put forth her hand to bid Birdalone stay, who came up to her friend and stood before her eager and quivering: and anon came the sound of a man's voice singing, though they could hear no

words in it as yet amidst the rustle of the trees and the tumult of song which the blackbirds and throstles raised in the dale below them.

Then spake the wood-wife softly: Hearken, we are right and the time is good, our beast is giving tongue: now below us is the bent-side steep, and goeth down into a very little dale with a clear stream running amidst; and therein is the very lair of the thing that we are hunting. Wherefore now let us slip warily down between the bushes till we get close to the bottom, and then belike we shall see the very creature quite close, and we shall then consider and think what we shall do with him.

Birdalone had no voice wherewith to answer her, but she stole quietly along by her side till they came to the bank of the dale and plunged into the thicket that flourished there, and fell to threading it, making them as small as might be. But ere they had gone but a little way the wordless song of what was below had ceased, and they heard the sweet tingle of the string-play, and the wood-wife stayed her to hearken, and the smiles went rippling over her face and she beat time with her fingers; but Birdalone, she stared wildly before her, and would have scrambled down the bank straightway at all hazards, for that string-play was a melody of the Castle of the Quest, but Habundia withheld her by the arm. And then suddenly the music died, and there came up a voice of wailing and lamenting, and Birdalone put her hands and held the palms tight against her ears, and was at point to cry out aloud herself; but Habundia drew a hand of her

down and whispered into her ear: Child, child, make thyself strong and forbear, and then perchance joy may come to thee; hold thy peace and come softly along with me!

So Birdalone forbore, and strove with her passion, though the sobs rent her bosom for a while; and by then the loud lamenting waned and was done, and the sound of sobbing came up from below, as it had been an echo of Birdalone's grief.

Then Habundia drew her on again till they saw the level of the dale and its stream piecemeal betwixt the leaves, and they had a glimpse of a man on the hither side of the stream; and again they went lower, till they were well-nigh on a level with the greensward of the dale; and as Birdalone knelt with head bent low, and her hands covering her eyes, the wood-wife put away from before her the thick leaves of a hazel-bush, and whispering said: Child, child! look forth now and see what is before thee, and see if thou knowest him, or if he be strange to thee, and thy mother hath done nought for thee when all is said.

Birdalone looked up, pale and wild-eyed, and into the dale, and saw a man sitting on the grass by the stream-side with his head bowed down on to his knees and his face covered with his hands; he was clad but in two or three deerskins hung about him, with a strip of skin for a girdle, wherein was thrust a short sword; his brown hair hung down long and shaggy over his face. Close by his side lay a little harp, and further off a short spear roughly hefted with an ash-staff. He was beating

the earth with his feet and writhing him about over them. And Birdalone looked, and her breath well-nigh failed her. For presently he sat more quietly, and lifted up his head, and she saw his face that it was Arthur, her beloved; and now she durst not move lest he should spring up and flee away; and the mingled pain and longing within her was sweet indeed, but well-nigh deadly.

Now his hand sought round to his harp, and he took it in his arms and fondled it as it were, and his fingers went among the strings, and anon the voice of it came forth, and it was nought changed from the last time it spake, and Birdalone hearkened breathlessly, till the melody died again and Arthur looked about him and raised his face as a dog when it fares to howl.

Then Birdalone gave a great cry, and leapt forth out of the thicket and stood on the greensward with nought betwixt them two, and she stretched out her arms to her beloved and cried out: O! no, no, no! do it not, I beseech thee, lest I deem that thou art all changed, and that the man and the dear heart beloved of thee has gone out of thee and left thee but a beast in a man's shape!

He leapt up as she spake, and thrust forward his head and looked fierce at her, and cried out: What! art thou come again? This is the second time I have seen thee, thou image of her that hath tormented me so long; of her that left me in my most need and hid herself away from me. Hah! a man, sayest thou? Did I not strive with it, and hold my manhood so long as I might; and at last it might

no longer be, and I became a beast and a man-slayer? But what avails it to talk with thee, since thou art but the image of her that hath wasted my life. Yet perchance of the image I may make an end since I may not lay hand on the very destroyer herself; and, woe's me, how I loved her! yea, and do still; but not thee, O false image!

And forthwith he drew the blade from his girdle and sprang forward at Birdalone; and she cowered and cringed, but moved not else. But therewithal the wood-wife came leaping through the bushes, and she nocked an arrow on her bended bow, and threatened him therewith, and cried out: Thou man-beast, I will slay thee if thou hurt my child and my dear; so forbear! Nay, I tell thee more, unless thou make her as glad at the sight of thee as I meant her to be, I will in the long run slay thee; so look to it.

He laughed and said: What! there is another image of the love that wasted me, is there! Nay, but by the Hallows, this new-comer is the first one, and the one who chattered at me is the second. Or is it this, that all women now have the semblance of the evil one that has undone me, and there is nought else left?

And he stood staring at Birdalone and moved not a while; and she stood with her hands before her face cringing before him. Then he raised his arm and cast the weapon far into the bushes of the bank-side, and then came forward and stood before Birdalone, and drew down her hands from her face and stared in the eyes of her, holding her by the

two arms; and he said: Thou hast forgotten now, belike, how fair a life we two might have lived if thou hadst not fled from me and spoiled me.

And thou! by the looks of thee, for thou art sleek and fair, though this moment thou art pale for fear of me, thou hast lived a happy life through all these years, with many a merry thing to think of: and dost thou deem that my life was happy, or that I thought of any merry thing, or of anything save my sorrow? Dost thou doubt it? go ask the good spears of Greenford, or the Riders of the Red Hold, and the field of the slaughter! If there was little joy there, less was there elsewhere.

He left go of her therewith and stood trembling before her, and she bowed down and put palm to palm and held them out to him as one who prays; and she knew not what she did.

Then he cried out with a lamentable cry and said: O woe's me! for I have frighted her and scared the wit out of her, so that she knows not who I am nor what I would; and I would pray to her and beseech her to pity me, and not depart from me again or mock me with images of herself.

Then he went down on his knees to her, and he also joined his hands to pray to her; but it seemed as if she was stricken to stone, so wholly she moved not. But for him, he sank his forehead to earth, and then he rolled over and his limbs stretched out, and his head turned aside and blood gushed out from his mouth. But Birdalone shrieked out and cast herself on his body, and cried: I have found him, and he is dead! he is dead, and I have slain

him, because I was a timorous fool and feared him; and he was coming to his right mind and knew me for what I was!

But Habundia came and stood over them, and drew up Birdalone, and said: Nay, nay, be comforted! for now he is thus, and the strength is gone out of him for a while, we may deal with him. Abide, and I will fetch the blood-staunching herb and the sleepy herb, and then we will heal him, and he will come to his right mind and be a man again.

Therewith she hastened away and was gone but a little; and meanwhile Birdalone knelt down by her love and wiped the blood from him, and caressed his sword-hardened hands and moaned over him. But when the wood-wife came back she put Birdalone aside once more, and knelt down by the squire and raised his head, and laid the blood-stauncher to his mouth and his heart, and muttered words over him, while Birdalone looked over her shoulder with her pale face; then the she-leech fetched water from the stream in a cup which she drew from her wallet, and she washed his face, and he came somewhat to himself, so that she might give him drink of the water; and yet more he came to himself. So then she took the sleepy herb and bruised it in her hands and put in his mouth and again said words over him, and presently his head fell back and his eyes closed and he slept peacefully.

She stood up then and turned to Birdalone and said: Now, my child, have we done all that we may do, save that we shall bring him to a place where the dew and the sun shall not torment him and

sicken him; for he shall lie thus till the sun comes up to-morrow, or longer; and fear not, for when he awaketh he shall be in his right mind, and shall know thee and love thee. This I swear to thee by the earth and the sun and the woodland.

Said Birdalone, trembling yet: O mother, but may I kiss him and caress him? Yea, surely, said the wood-mother, smiling in her face, but be not too long over it, for lo! the last of the sun, and it were better that he be under cover ere the twilight falls.

Birdalone knelt down by her love quietly at that word, and fell to kissing him softly, and laid her cheek to his, and called him gentle names such as none can tell again without shame, till the wood-wife laid her hand on her shoulder and said kindly and sweetly: Rise up now, for thou must make it enough for this present; thou shalt have time enough hereafter for more and much more.

So Birdalone arose and said: How shall we bear him to his place? Shall I not take him by the shoulders and thou by the legs? For I am stronger than thou after all these years.

Laughed the wood-wife: Nay, little one, said she; thou knowest me not utterly as yet. Thou shalt not bear him at all, nor any part of him; I am strong enough for more than that; see thou! And she stooped down and took him up in her arms as if he were a little child, and stepped off lightly with him; but looked back over her shoulder and said to Birdalone: But thou mayest walk by me and hold a hand of him as we go, though it

will hinder me somewhat; but I know thine heart and would pleasure thee, my child.

Birdalone ran up to her and thanked her and kissed her, and took Arthur's left hand, while Habundia bore him on down the dale and out of it, and still along the stream till they came to a place where it was narrow on either side thereof, and a sheer rock came down so near to the water that there was but a strip of greensward three yards wide betwixt water and rock; and in the face of the rock was a cave wide enough for a man to enter by stooping somewhat. Therein the wood-wife lightly bore Arthur, and Birdalone followed; and they found the cave dry and roomy within; there was a bed therein of dry heather and bracken, and thereon Habundia laid her burden, and said: Now, my child, there is nought to do but abide till he comes to himself again, which may be some time to-morrow; and be of good cheer, for he will come to his right self, but he will be weak and humble; but I shall have meat and drink ready for him. Now if thou wilt be ruled by me, thou wilt keep out of the way when he awakens; moreover, be thou not scared if I meet his awakening with another shape than that which thou hast known of me; for sure it is that it will trouble his wits over-much if again he seeth the two of us alike. But fear not; for thy sake, my child, I will take no ugly shape, though it may well be less beauteous than thine.

I will do what thou wilt, mother, said Birdalone, for I see that thou art helping me all thou mayest;

yet I beseech thee let me sit by him till the time of his awakening draweth nigh.

The wood-wife smiled and nodded yeasay on her, and they sat down, both of them, beside the sleeping man, and the day died into the night as they sat hearkening to the ripple of the brook and the song of the nightingales.

CHAPTER XXIV. THE WOOD-MOTHER CHANGETH HER FORM TO THAT OF A WOMAN STRICKEN IN YEARS.

WHEN the morrow came, there yet lay Arthur sleeping peacefully, and Birdalone awoke from the slumber which had at last fallen on her, and looked about her and saw not Habundia in the cave; so she arose and bent over Arthur and kissed him, and so went forth and stood in the door and looked about her. And she was still dim-eyed with her just departed slumber and the brightness of the morning sunlight, and she scarce knew whether it were a part of a dream, or a sight that was verily before her, that she seemed to see one coming across the brook toward her, stepping heedfully from stone to stone thereof: a woman stricken in years, but slim and trim and upright, clad in a gown of green cloth, with a tippet of some white fur. When she was come on to the greensward she spake to Birdalone in a sweet voice, but thin with eld, and gave her the sele of the day; and Birdalone was somewhat afraid to see a newcomer, but she greeted her, drawing back a little from her shyly. But the old woman said: What maketh thee here, my daughter? Dost thou not know that this is my land and my house, and that I am said not to be unmighty in these woods?

I pray thee pardon me if I have done amiss, said Birdalone; but here have I a sick friend, a young man, and I would pray thee suffer him to abide here in this cave a little longer; for there hath

been also another friend, a woman, but she hath gone out while I slept, belike to gather simples, for she is wise in leechcraft, and is tending the sick man. I pray thee humbly to suffer us lest we lose our friend.

As she spake, she heard the carline chuckle softly, and at last she said: Why, Birdalone, my dear, dost thou not know me after all these years? Look on me again, look! and thou shalt see that I am not so much changed from what thou sawest me last night. I am still thine image, my dear, only I was the image of what thou wert, and now am I the image of what thou shalt be when two score years and ten of happy life have worn for thee. Tell me, am I now aught like to thy mother in the flesh?

How hast thou frighted me, mother, said Birdalone; I thought that my friend had forsaken me, and that perchance the new-comer was another witch like unto the old one, and that I was never to be at rest and happy. But as to my mother in the flesh, nay, thou art not now wholly like unto her; and sooth to say I shall be fainer when thou hast thine own shape of me young back again, for I love thee not so much as now thou art.

The wood-wife laughed: Well, she said, thou shalt not see over-much of me in this shape; and that the less because of something I shall now tell thee, to wit, that I have been thinking the matter over, and I would have thee leave us twain together alone before the young man awaketh. I would have thee get thee home and abide him there; it

shall not be long I promise thee; and this also, that he shall come home to thee sound in body and whole in limb.

Birdalone's countenance fell, and she said: Why this second mind, mother? why, I pray thee? Said Habundia: I fear for thy love lest he be not strong enough to open his eyes upon thy face; but after he hath been a day in the woods, and I have spoken to him diversely and cheered him with the hope of meeting thee, he may well be strong enough to seek thee for a mile's length, and find thine house first and then thee. So now wilt thou obey me? Nay, if thou must needs weep, I will be gone into the thicket till thou hast done, thou wilful! Birdalone smiled through her tears, and said: I pray thee pardon my wilfulness, mother, and I will depart without turning back into the cave. Nay, said Habundia, there is no need for so much haste as that: I will in now, and do my leechdoms with the sick man. But do thou go across the stream, thou barefoot, and thou wilt find on the other side, by the foot of the quicken-tree yonder, honeycombs and white bread and a bicker of wild goats' milk. Bathe thee then if thou wilt, and bring those matters over hither; and then shalt thou go in and kiss thy mate's sick face with thy fresh one, and thereafter shall we sit here by the ripple of the water and break our fast; and lastly, thou shalt go in and kiss again and then take to the road. But tell me, deemest thou surely that thou canst find it again? Yea, surely, mother, said Birdalone; I am

wood-woman enough for that; and now I will do all thy will. And therewith she stepped out lightly on to the greensward, and sought up the stream till she found a smooth-grounded pool meet for her bath, and when that was done, she fetched the victual and came back to the wood-wife; then they two sat down together, and ate and drank while the water rippled at their feet. But when they were done, Birdalone gat her into the cave again, and kissed the sleeping man fondly, and came forth lightly and stood a moment before the wood-wife, and said: Tell me this at least, mother, when shall he be there? To-morrow, quoth the wood-wife; and, for my part, I would keep thee within doors and abide him there, lest there be trouble; for he may not yet be as strong as the strongest. Birdalone hung down her head and answered not, but said presently: Farewell, wood-mother, and be thou blessed. Then she took up her bow and betook her lightly to the woodland way, and the wood-wife stood looking at her till the thicket had hidden her, and then turned back and went into the cave.

CHAPTER XXV. THE WOOD-WIFE HEALETH AND TENDETH THE BLACK SQUIRE.

SHE stood over Arthur for a minute or two, and then stooped down and whispered a word in his ear, and presently he stirred on the bed and half opened his eyes, but straightway turned on his side, as if to gather sleep to him, but she took him by the shoulder and said in a clear voice: Nay, knight, nay; hast thou not slept enough? is there nought for thee to do? He sat up in the bed and rubbed his eyes, and his face was come to its wholesome colour, and his eyes looked out quietly and calmly as he looked about the cave and saw the wood-wife standing by him; and he spake in a voice which was somewhat weak, but wherein was no passion of rage or woodness: Where am I then? and who art thou, dame? She said: Thou art in a cave of the woodland, and I am for one thing thy leech, and meseemeth thou desirest to eat and to drink. He smiled and nodded his head; and she fetched him the milk, and he drank a long draught, and sighed thereafter, as one who is pleased; and she smiled on him, and fetched him the bread and the honey, and he ate and drank again, and then lay down and fell fast asleep. And she suffered his slumber for two hours or so, and then awoke him again; and again he asked where he was and what was she, but she said as before. And said she: The next thing thou hast to do is to arise, as thou well mayest, and take

this raiment, which is fair and clean, and go wash thee in the brook and come back to me; and then we will talk, and thou shalt tell me of how it was with thee, and peradventure I may tell thee somewhat of how it shall be with thee. As she spoke she went to a coffer which stood in a nook of the cave, and drew forth from it a shirt and hosen and shoon, and a surcoat and hood of fine black cloth, and a gilded girdle and a fair sword, red-sheathed, and said: These may serve thy turn for the present, so take them and don them, and thou shalt look like a squire at least, if not a knight.

So he arose as one in a dream and went out; but as he passed by her she saw something gleaming on his breast, and noted that it was Birdalone's fair sapphire ring which hung about his neck; so she smiled, and said under her breath: Crafty is my dear daughter! But that shall save me some words at least. And she abided his return.

Anon he cometh back clad in the fair raiment, with the sword by his side; and the wood-wife smote her palms together and cried out: Now indeed thou art fair and well-liking, and a fair lady might well take pleasure in beholding thee.

But his brow was knit, and he looked sullen and angry, and he said: What is all this play? and where gattest thou this ring which I found e'en now about my neck? And who art thou, and why have I been brought hither?

His eyes looked fiercely on her as he spake, holding out his palm with the ring lying thereon. But the wood-wife answered: Many questions, fair

youth! but I will tell thee: the play is for thine healing and pleasure, whereas both sick hast thou been and sorry. As to the ring, it is thou hast got it and not I. But I will tell thee this, that I have seen it on the finger of a fair damsel who haunteth the woodland not far hence. As to what I am, that were a long tale to tell if I told it all; but believe this meanwhile, that I am the lady and mistress of hereabouts, and am not without power over my folk and my land. And as to why thou wert brought hither, I brought thee because I had no better house handy for a sick man to lie in.

Then Arthur stood a long while considering the ring that lay on his palm, and at last he put his hand on the wood-wife's shoulder, and looked into her face beseechingly, and said: O mother, if thou be mighty be merciful withal, and have pity on me! Thou callest me a youth, and so I may be in regard to thee; but I tell thee it is five long years and there hath been no other thought in my heart but what was loathsome to me, and it hath worn and wasted my youth, so that it waneth and withereth and is nought. O, if thou be mighty, bring me to her that I may see her at least one time before I die. And therewith he fell down on his knees before her, and kissed the hem of her gown, and wept. But she drew him up and looked on him with the merry countenance of a kind old woman, and said: Nay, nay, I am not so hard to be won to thy helping that thou needest pray so sore and weep: here need we tarry no longer, and if thou wilt come with me we shall go seek the damsel

who bore this ring, though how it should come to thee why should I know? Neither do I know if the said ring-bearer be the one woman whom thou needest. But I will tell thee at once that she is a dear friend of mine.

Then Arthur threw his arms about her, and kissed her cheeks and blessed her, while she laughed on him and said: Nay, fair sir, if thou wilt do so much with the withered branch, what wilt thou with the blossom of the tree? And he was abashed before her, but hope made his heart to dance.

So the wood-wife took up her bow, slung her quiver at her back, and girt her short sword to her, and then led him forth, and so into the thicket out of the dale and forth into the oaken bent, and lightly she led him thereafter through the wood-land.

CHAPTER XXVI. THE BLACK SQUIRE TELLETH THE WOOD-WIFE OF HIS DOINGS SINCE BIRDALONE WENT FROM THE CASTLE OF THE QUEST.

AS they went Habundia said to Arthur: Now shalt thou talk and tell for the shortening of the way, and let us know somewhat of thy story. But first I must tell thee, for thou mayest not know it, so witless as then thou wast, that yesterday we found thee down in the dale yonder, playing the string-play sweetly indeed, but otherwise dight like a half beast more than a man, so that we wondered at thee and pitied thee.

Arthur knit his brows as if he strove with some memory and might not master it; then he said: Thou sayest We, who then was the other? Said Habundia: I had a dear friend with me. Quoth he: And did she pity me also? Yea, said the wood-wife, else scarce had she been a friend to me. O let us on swiftly, said Arthur, so long as the time may be! And they quickened their pace and ate up the way speedily.

Presently spake the wood-wife again: Now for the tale of thee, fair sir; yet will I shorten it somewhat by telling thee that I know thy name, that thou art Arthur the Black Squire of the Castle of the Quest. He stared at that word, and said: How knewest thou this? how couldst thou guess it, who hast never seen me erst? A friend told me, said she; too long it were as now to tell thee thereof. Rather do thou tell me how thou didst fare when

ye found thy friend gone from the castle that time ye came home from the winning of the Red Hold.

Arthur stared astonished, and said: What is it? Dost thou verily know my love? or art thou a sorceress and knowest somewhat of me by spell-work? I am somewhat more than a sorceress, may-happen, said the wood-wife; but heed it not, since I am thy friend to-day, but tell me what I ask, that I may have all the tale of thee; it will serve for the shortening of the way. Said Arthur: And who but I needeth it as short as may be? so stand we not loitering here, and I will talk as we wend on speedily.

On they sped therefore, and said Arthur: How did I fare? as one stunned, mother, and knew not what had happened; and when I heard their babble of how she had done wrong here and right there, I was driven half mad by it, so that I hastened back to the Red Hold, and became the captain of Greenford, to hunt down their scattered foemen; for I said to myself that needs must I rage and slay, and that were worser amongst my friends than mine unfriends. What then? that business came to an end; though all the ill men were not slain, but all were driven away from the parts of Greenford; and sooth to say they durst not come anywhere nigh where they heard of me. Then became each day like every other, and the thought of my hope and my despair ate mine heart out, and I was of no avail unto any. Now it so happened, amidst my many battles and chases, I

had hunted the bands of the Red Hold into the northwest marches of the woodland; and I noted that even they, howsoever hard bestead, and the worst of men to boot, would scarce at the first be driven into the thickets thereof, though at last, whether or no they have made covenant with the devils there I know not, they have betaken them to the depths of the wood and have borne off women from the dwellings and got children on them, and are like to breed an evil folk. That then I noted that this Evilshaw was a dwelling loathed and desert, and little like it was that any would meddle with me there. Three years had worn since I was cast away at the Castle of the Quest by her that loved me, who must needs sacrifice both her and me to the busy devil of folly; and I also deemed that if I sought for her I should not find her; and yet more forsooth, that if I found her she would be as hard unto me as when she fled from me. And as for me, I was gotten hard and crabbed, and no man, if his heart would let him, would have aught to say to me. So I gat me away from the Red Hold, as I had from the Castle of the Quest, and I gave out that I would enter into religion, and forbade any man to follow me. Neither did any desire it. First of all I set me down at the very outskirts of the woodland, and raised me a bower there, rude and ill-shapen. Few folk came anigh me, and yet some few, charcoal-burners, and hunters of the edges of the wood, and such-like. These deemed me a holy man, whereas I was but surly. Somewhat also they feared me, whereas in some of their huntings or

goings and comings after prey I had put forth all my strength, eked out by the lore of knighthood, which was strange to them. One man there was of them who was fashioned of the minstrel craft by nature, and who forgathered with me specially, till we became friends, and he was a solace to me, with his tales and his songs of a rougher people than I had been wont to deal with. But when I had been in that place for two years he died of a sickness, and I was left lonely, and my soreness of heart fell upon me till I scarce knew what next I should do. So I fared away yet deeper into the wildwood, taking with me the harp which my friend had given me before he died. It was summer, and I wandered about ever deeper into the wood, until belike I had scarce been able to win out of it if I had tried. At last, when the autumn came, I built myself again some sort of a bower in a clearing of the wood wherein was water, and the resort of plenteous venison.

What befell next? My mind is not over-clear concerning it all, for I was now becoming more of a beast than a man. But this I know, that some men of the bands whom I had chased happened on me. They knew me not for their old foeman, but of their kind it was to torment and slay any man whom they might lightly overcome. Yet was not the battle so over-light but that I slew and hurt divers of them ere they got me under and stripped me and bound my hands and tormented me, after the manner that the devils shall do with them when they shall go to their reward. Yet somehow I lived,

though they deemed me dead, and I crawled away thence when they were gone; and somehow I was healed of my body, but I was confused of my wit thereafter, and now can call to mind but little of what befell me as I strayed from place to place, save that I remember I was hapless and heart-sore ever: and also meseemeth that I saw visions at whiles, and those who had been in my life before these things, their images would come before me to mock me as I sat singing whiles and whiles playing the string-play (for my harp I bore ever with me); and whiles I bewailed me, and called for help on them that would not or might not help me. And now I may not even tell the years of my abiding in the desert, how many they be. But I pray thee let us on more swiftly yet.

Said the wood-wife: Thou hast told me but little of thy life, Black Squire, but it is enough maybe; and I see that thou mayst not tell me more because thou hast thy mind set on what may betide thee when this day is over. But thou must know that thou hast come into the wood of Evilshaw, wherein, besides those savage men who quelled thee and their like, there be uncouth things no few, and wights that be not of the race of Adam; wherefore no great marvel is it that thou sawest visions, and images of them that were not by thee. Yea, said he, but one vision had I that confused and overcame me more than all others, and meseemeth that came to me not long ago. For first I saw the shape of her that my soul desireth ever, and it wept and lamented for me; and then for a little I seemed as if I were coming forth from my confusion of wit; when lo! there

issued from the thicket another image of my beloved and blamed me and threatened me. God wot good cause there was of the blame. But tell me, mother, since thou callest thyself wise, what may this portend?

The wood-wife laughed: Since I am wise, said she, I will foretell thee good days. And now we will talk no more of thee or thy love or thy sorrow, but since thou wilt so fiercely devour the way, I will tell thee a tale or two of this wood and its wights to save us from over-much weariness.

So did she, talking and telling as they went; and she went on a pace before him, and howsoever long or hardly he might stride he might not overgo her. And so fast they went, that they were within a little way of the Oak of Tryst a good while before the sun had set, though they had set out from the cave three hours after the hour when Birdalone and the wood-wife had left the House under the Wood on the yesterday. They had come to a steep rock that rose up from a water's side, and the wood-wife bade stay, whether Arthur would or no, and she made him eat and drink, bringing the victual and wine from out of a cleft in the said rock. And she held him there till the night was come and there was a glimmer of the rising moon in the east, and he was ill at ease and restless; but still she held him there till the moon rose high and shone upon them, and the shadows of the oak-boughs lay black all around.

Then she bade him arise, and let him on to the Oak of Tryst, yea and somewhat beyond it toward the great water. Then she spake to him: Black

Squire, I am now come home, and will lead thee no further; I was deeming that we should have slept in the wood a good way from this, and then would I have brought thee on thy way to-morrow morning; but the eagerness of thine heart hath made thy feet so speedy, that we be here somewhat rathe, and yet I am not ill-pleased therewith. Then she turned him about and said: Look down the bent and tell me what thou seest. He said: I see the boles of goodly trees, and betwixt them the gleaming of a great water. She said: Go thitherward then while the moon is yet at her brightest, and thou shalt presently come to wide meads lying along the water, and a stream running through them. Enter then into the meads and look about thee, and thou shalt see a little house (there is none other nigh) standing just across the said stream; go up thither boldly and crave guesting from whomsoever thou shalt find there, and maybe things shall go after thy mind. More than this I may not do for thee. Farewell then, and if thou wilt thou mayst meet me again; that is to say, that which is verily me: but it is like that this shape which hath been striding on with thee daylong thou shalt not see any more.

He looked on her wondering, for she seemed to grow goodly and stately before his eyes. But even as he stretched forth his hand to take hers, she turned about suddenly and fared into the wood out of his sight, wending full as swiftly as might have been looked for. Then he drew his sword and turned his face from the wood, and went down toward the water.

CHAPTER XXVII. SIR ARTHUR COMETH TO THE HOUSE UNDER THE WOOD.

SO came Arthur into the meadows, and went eagerly but warily over the dewy grass. And here and there a cow rose before him and went bundling down the mead a little way, and the owls cried out from behind him, and a fox barked from the thicket's edge. Then he found himself on the stream-side, and he stayed and looked from side to side, and lo! on the other side of the stream a little house that looked familiar to him as a yeoman's dwelling in the builded lands, and the thatch thereon shone under the moon and its windows were yellow with candle-light; and so homely it seemed to him, that he thrust his sword into the sheath and lightly crossed the brook, and came to the door and laid his hand upon the latch and lifted it and shoved the door, and all was open before him.

His eyes, coming from the night, dazzled with the bright light of the candles, but he saw a fair woman rising up in her place, and he said: May a traveller in the woodland be welcome here to-night, dealing with all in all honour?

But the woman came toward him holding out her two hands, and ere he could cry out that he knew her, she had thrown herself upon him, and had cast her arms about him and was kissing his face, and murmuring: O welcome indeed! welcome, welcome, and welcome! And so sore did

his past grief and his desire move him, that he was weak before her, and held down his hands and let her do. And both those were breathless with wonder and joy and longing; and they stood aloof a little in a while and looked on each other, she with heaving bosom and streaming eyes, and he with arms stretched forth and lips that strove with his heart's words and might not utter them; but once more she gave herself to him, and he took her in his arms strongly now, so that she was frail and weak before him, and he laid his cheek to her cheek and his lips to her lips, and kissed her eyes and her shoulders and murmured over her. And then again they stood apart, and she took him by the hand and led him to the settle, and set him down by her, and herself by him; and a while they said nought. Then she spake as one who had come to herself and was calm, though her heart was aflame for love: Tell me, love, when thine hand was on the latch didst thou look to find me here in this house? for thine hand it was that waked me; I heard not thy foot before the threshold, for I was weary and slumbering. Alas! that I lost the sound of thy feet! He spake, and his voice sounded false unto him, as if it came from another's mouth: I wot not; the woman that led me nearby seemed to bid me hope. Then he said: Nay, the sooth is that I should have died if I had not found thee here; I have been sick so long with hoping.

Again were they silent till she said: I would that I had heard thee crossing the brook. But the wood-wife bade me look for thee no earlier than

to-morrow; else had I time enough; and I would have made the house trim with the new green boughs, and dighted our bed with rose blooms; and I would have done on me my shining gown that the wood-wife gave me. For indeed she was but clad in her scanty smock and nought else.

But he laid his head on her bosom and kissed her all about, and said: Nay, my own love, it is well, it is better. And she murmured over him: O friend, my dear, think not that I had will to hide me from thee. All that is here of me is thine, and thine, and thine.

And she took his hand and they arose together, and she said: O friend, I fled from thee once and left thee lonely of me because I deemed need drave me to it; and I feared the strife of friends, and confusion and tangle. Now if thou wilt avenge thee on me thou mayest, for I am in thy power. Yet will I ask thee what need will drive thee to leave me lonely?

He said: The need of death. But she said: Mayhappen we shall lie together then, as here to-night we shall lie.

CHAPTER XXVIII. FAIR DAYS IN THE HOUSE OF LOVE.

ON the morrow it was sweet times betwixt those twain, and what was hard and fierce of their love they seemed to have put behind them. A dear joy it was to Birdalone that day to busy herself about the housekeeping, and to provide whatsoever seemed now, or had seemed to her in her early days, to be dainties of their meadow and woodland husbandry, as cream and junkets and wood-fruit and honey, and fine bread made for that very occasion.

Withal she was careful as a mother with a child that he should not over-weary himself with the sun of the early summer, but rather to follow the brook up into the wood and lie adown in the flecked shadow and rest him wholly, as if there were nought for him to do but to take in rest all that was done for his service, both by the earth and by the hands and nimble feet of Birdalone. And as she was wilful in other ways of her cherishing, so also in this, that for nought in that daylight would she go anywise disarrayed, nay not so much as to go barefoot, though he prayed her thereof sorely, and told her that fairer and sweeter she was in her smock alone than in any other raiment. For in the morning she went in her woodland green let down to her heels, and when the day wore towards evening, and the wind came cool from over the Great Water, then she did on her wonder-raiment which the wood-wife had given her, and led Arthur over the

meadows here and there, and went gleaming by the side of the black-clad man along the water's lip. And they looked forth on to Green Eyot and Rock Eyot, and stood by the shallow bight where she had bathed those times; and they went along to the dismal creek where the Sending Boat was wont to lie, and where yet lay the scattered staves of it; and then along the meadow-land they went from end to end, resting oft on the flowery grass, till the dews began to fall and the moon cast shadows on the greensward. Then home they fared to the house; and again on the way must Birdalone feign for their disport that the witch was come back again, and was awaiting her to play the tyrant with her; and Arthur fell in with her game, and kissed her and clipped her, and then drew his sword and said: By All-hallows I shall smite off her head if she but lay a finger on thee.

So they played like two happy children till they came to the door of the house, and Birdalone shoved it open, and they two looked in together and saw nought worse therein save the strange shadows that the moon cast from the settle on to the floor. Then Birdalone drew in her love, and went about lighting the candles and quickening a little cooking fire on the hearth, till the yellow light chased the moon away from the bed of their desire.

CHAPTER XXIX. THOSE TWAIN WILL SEEK THE WISDOM OF THE WOOD-WIFE.

AGAIN next day was their life such as it had been the day before; and as they lay in cool shadow of a great oak, Birdalone fell to telling Arthur all the whole story of her dealings with the wood-wife, and how that she had so loved her and holpen her, that through her love and her help she had escaped the witch and her snares, who would have turned her into a half-devil for the undoing of manfolk. And how that the said wood-wife had never appeared to her but as an image and double of herself, save on the time when she played the leech to him. Then she told him how all had gone when the wood-wife had sought him out for the fulfilment of their love, and of the dreadful day when they had come upon him out of his wit and but little manlike.

Then she asked, would he, within the next day or two, that they should go see the wood-wife together and thank her for her help, and bring him within the ring of her love and guarding; and he yeasaid it with a good will.

After this she would have him tell her of how things had gone with him since that evil day when he had come home from the Castle of the Quest and found her gone. So he told her somewhat, and of his dole and misery, and his dealings with the foemen of Greenford; but yet scantly, and as one compelled; and at last he said:

with her concerning it. Then she smiled upon him and said: But when thou seest her, wilt thou be aghast if she come before us in my shape of what I was five years agone, or six?

Nay, nay, he said, thou art not so terrible as that; not very far do I run from thee now. And therewith they kissed and embraced, and so entered the House of Love.

CHAPTER XXX. THEY HAVE SPEECH WITH HABUNDIA CONCERNING THE GREEN KNIGHT AND HIS FELLOWS.

WHEN the morrow was they arose and went their ways toward the wood, and Birdalone in her hunter's coat, quiver at back and bow in hand. They came to the Oak of Tryst, and Birdalone was at point to call on the wood-wife by the burning of a hair of hers, when she came lightly from out the thicket, clad as Birdalone, and her very image. She stood before them with a glad countenance, and said: Welcome to the seekers and finders. But Arthur stepped forth and knelt before her, and took her right hand and kissed it, and said: Here I swear allegiance to thee, O Lady of the Woods, to do thy will in all things, and give thee thanks from my heart more than my tongue can say.

Quoth the wood-wife: I take thine allegiance, fair young man, and mine help shalt thou have henceforward. Then she smiled and her eyes danced for merriment, and she said: Yet thy thanks meseemeth for this while are more due to the wise carline who brought thee through the woods two days ago, and only left thee when the way was easy and clear to thee.

Lady, said Arthur, I know now how great is thy might, and that thou canst take more shapes than this only; and humbly I thank thee that for us thou hast taken the shape that I love the best of all on the earth.

Said the wood-wife: Stand up, Black Squire, and consider a little what thou wouldst have me do for thee, while I have speech with mine image yonder. And therewith she came up to Birdalone, and drew her a little apart, and fell to stroking her cheeks and patting her hands and diversely caressing her, and she said to her: How now, my child, have I done for thee what I promised, and art thou wholly happy now? O yea, said Birdalone; if nought else befell us in this life but to dwell together betwixt the woodland and the water, and to see thee oft, full happy should we be.

Nevertheless, said Habundia, art thou not come hither to ask somewhat of me, that ye may be happier? So it is, wise mother, said Birdalone; grudge not against me therefor, for more than one thing drives me thereto. I will not grudge, said the wood-wife; but now I will ask thy mate if he has thought what it is that he will have of me. And she turned to Arthur, who came forth and said: Lady, I have heard thee, and herein would we have thee help us: There were erst six fellows of us, three carles and three queans, to whom was added this sweetling here; but one of them, to wit the Golden Knight, was slain, and for the rest . . . Yea, I know, said the wood-wife; my child here hath told me all; and now ye wot not where they are or if they be yet alive, all or any of them. Now is it not so that ye would seek these friends, if it were but to greet them but once, and that ye would ask of the wise wood-wife help to find them? Is there any more of the tale? Nay, lady, said Arthur.

Said she: Well then, that help shall ye have, were it but for the sake of that little Viridis whereof my child hath told me. Wherefore abide tidings of me for a fourteen days, and seek not to me ere then; and meantime fear not, nor doubt me, for many messengers I have, and ever may I do somewhat if the end of the tale is to be told in these woodlands: and I deem these friends will not be hard to draw hither, for it is most like that they be thinking of you and longing for you, as ye for them. And now I will depart on my business, which is yours, and do ye be happy to-day in the woodland, and to-morrow in the meadows and by the water; and let no trouble weigh down your happy days.

Therewith she flitted away from them, when she had kissed them both. But when she was gone they fared away together deep into the wood, and were exceeding merry disporting them, and on their return they gat them venison for their meat, and so came back to the House of Love when the moon was up and shining brightly.

CHAPTER XXXI. HABUNDIA COMETH WITH TIDINGS OF THOSE DEAR FRIENDS.

WORE the days thenceforth merrily; and one day it was delight in the wide meads, and another they went a long way west along the water-side, and so into another meadow-plain, smaller than their home-plain, which Birdalone had never erst come into; and three eyots lay off it, green and tree-beset, whereto they swam out together. Then they went into the wood thereby in the heat of the afternoon, and so wore the day, that they deemed themselves belated, and lay there under a thorn-bush the night through.

Another day Birdalone took her mate over on to Green Eyot and Rock Eyot, and showed him all the places she was used to haunt. And they had their fishing-gear with them, and angled off the eyots a good part of the day, and had good catch, and swam back therewith merrily. And Birdalone laughed, and said that it seemed to her as if once again she were ransoming her skin of the witch-wife by that noble catch.

Divers times also they fared into the wood, and thrice they lay out the night there in some wood-lawn where was water; and on one of these times it happed that Arthur awoke in the grey dawn, and lay open-eyed but not moving for a little; and therewith he deemed he saw the gleam of war-gear in the thicket. So he kept as still as he might, but gat his sword out of its sheath without noise,

and then leapt up suddenly, and sprang thitherward whereas he had seen that token, and again saw armour gleam and heard some man crashing through the underwood, for all was gone in one moment. So he woke up Birdalone, and they bended their bows both of them, and searched the thicket thereabouts heedfully, arrow on string, but found nought fiercer than a great sow and her farrow. So came the full day, and they gat them back to their meadows and their house; but thereafter were they warier in going about the woodland.

In all joyance then wore the days till the fifteenth, and in the morning early they went their ways to the Oak of Tryst, and had no need to call Habundia to them, for presently she came forth out of the thicket, with her gown gathered up into her girdle and bow in hand. But she cast it down and ran up to Birdalone, and kissed her and clipped her, and then she took a hand of Arthur and a hand of Birdalone, and held them both and said: My child, and thou dear knight, have ye still a longing to fall in with those friends of yours, and to run all risk of whatsoever contention and strife there may be betwixt you thereafter? Yea, certes, said Arthur; and even so said Birdalone. Well is that then, said the wood-wife; but now and for this time, ere I help you, I shall put a price upon my help, and this is the price, that ye swear to me never wholly to sunder from me; that once in the year at least, as long as ye be alive and wayworthy, ye come into the Forest of Evilshaw, and summon

me by the burning of a hair of mine, that we may meet and be merry for a while, and part with the hope of meeting once more at least. And if ye will not pay the price, go in peace, and ye shall yet have my help in all other matters that may seem good unto you, but not in this of joining your fellowship together. How sayest thou, Birdalone, my child? How sayest thou, Black Squire, whom, as meseemeth, I have delivered from a fate worse than death, and have brought out of wretchedness into bliss?

Spake Birdalone: Had I dared, I would have bidden thee to swear to me even such an oath, to wit, that thou wouldst never wholly sunder thee from me. How then may I not swear this that thou biddest me, and that with all joy and trustiness?

Spake Arthur: Lady, had I no will to swear this oath for thy sake, yet with a good will would I swear it for my true-love's sake who loveth thee. Yet verily of mine own will would I swear it joyfully, were it for nought else save to pleasure thee, who hast done so kindly by me, and hath given me back my manhood and my love, which else I had miserably lost.

Spake the wood-wife: It is well again · join hands then, and swear as I have bidden you by the love ye bear each other.

Even so they did, and then the wood-wife kissed them both and said: Now do I deem you earth's very children and mine, and this desire of yours is good, and it shall be done if I may bring it about;

yet therein the valiance and wisdom of you both may well be tried. For this have I found out by my messengers and others, that your friends are alive, all of them; and they have thought of you in their inmost hearts, and have long determined that they must needs go seek you if they are to live lives happy and worthy. Furthermore, their quest hath drawn them hither to Evilshaw (nor say I that I have been nothing therein), and they are even now in the wood. But ye shall know that peril encompasses them; for they fare but a few, and of those few be there two traitors who are minded to deliver them to the men of the Red Company, unto whom three women as fair as your she-friends were a prize indeed. Wherefore the Red Folk are dogging them, and will fall upon them when they find the occasion. But I shall see to it that the occasion shall be in time and place where they shall not be unholpen. Now what ye have to do for your parts, is to waylay the waylayers, and keep watch and ward anigh the road they must needs take, and to fall on when need is. But this again I shall see to, that your onset fail not.

But now ye may say: Since thou art mighty, why shouldst not thou thyself take our friends out of the hands of these accursed, as thou couldst well do, and we to take no part therein? My friends, this might indeed well be; but thou, Bird-alone, hast told me the whole tale, and how that there be wrongs to be forgiven which cannot be made right, and past kindness to be quickened again, and coldness to be kindled into love, and

estrangement into familiar friendship; and me-seems that the sight of your bodies and your hands made manifest to the eyes of them may do somewhat herein. Yet if otherwise ye think, then so let it be, and go ye back to the House under the Wood, and in three days' time I will bring you your friends all safe and sound.

Now they both said that they would not for aught that they should have no hand in the deliverance of them; so the wood-wife said: Come with me, and I shall lead you to the place of your ambush.

Then all they went on together, and fared a long way west, and toward the place where erst they two had found Arthur; and at last, two hours before sunset, they came to where was a glade or way between the thickets, which was as it were a little beaten by the goings of man-folk. And the wood-wife did them to wit, that the evil folk afore-said had so used it and beaten it, that it might just look as if folk were wont to pass that way, where-as it was not very far from their chiefest haunt and stronghold. A little on the north side of this half-blind way, and some ten yards through the thicket, the ground fell away into a little dale, the bottom whereof was plain and well grassed, and watered by a brook.

Thither the wood-wife brought the twain; and when they all stood together on the brook-side, she said to them: Dear friends, this is your woodland house for this time, and I rede you go not forth of it, lest ye happen upon any of those evil men; for nought have ye to fear from any save them. Here

amidst these big stones, which make, see ye, as it were a cavern, have I stowed victual for you ; and armour therewithal, because, though both of you are in a manner armed, yet who knoweth where a shaft drawn at a venture may reach.

And from the said stones she drew forth two very fair armours, helm and hauberk, and leg and arm wards ; and they were all of green, and shone but little, but were fashioned as no smith of man-folk could have done the like.

This is thine, Sir Arthur, said the wood-wife, and thou wilt wear it like as it were silk ; and this thine, my child, and thou art strong enough to bear such light gear. And I charge you both to do on this gear presently, nor do it off till ye have achieved the adventure. And now this is the last word: here is a horn of oliphant which thou shalt wear about thy neck, Birdalone; and if thou be sore bestead, or thy heart faileth thee, blow in it, yet not before the onfall ; and then, whether thou blow much or little, thou shalt be well holpen.

Now be not downcast if nought befall to-night or to-morrow, or even the day after; but if the third day be tidingless, then at sunset burn a hair of my head, Birdalone, and I will come to you. And now farewell ! for I have yet to do in this matter.

With that she kissed Birdalone fondly and embraced Arthur, and went her way ; and those twain abode in the dale, and slept and watched by turns, and all was tidingless till the morrow's dawn; neither was there aught to tell of on that day and the night that ended it.

CHAPTER XXXII. OF THE FIGHT IN THE FOREST AND THE RESCUE OF THOSE FRIENDS FROM THE MEN OF THE RED COMPANY.

LIGHT was growing on the dawn of the next day, and the colours of things could be seen, when Birdalone, who was holding this last watch of the night, stood still and hearkened, deeming that she could hear some noise that was neither the morning wind in the tree-boughs nor the going of the wild things anear them in the wood.

So she did off her helm to hear the better, and stood thus a little; then she turned about and stooped down to Arthur, who was yet sleeping, and put forth a hand to rouse him. But or ever she touched him, broke forth a sound of big and rough voices and laughter, and amidst it two shrieks as of women.

Arthur heard it, and was on his feet in a moment, and helmed, and he caught up his bended bow and cast on the quiver (for Birdalone was already weaponed), and without more words they went forth swiftly up the bank and through the thicket till they were looking on the half-blind way, but under cover, and there was nothing before them as yet.

There they stayed and hearkened keenly. There were no more shrieks of women, nor heard they any weapon clash, but the talking and laughter of men went on; and at last they heard a huge and grim whoop of many men together; and then thereafter was less sound of talking, but came the jingle as of

arms and harness; and Arthur whispered in Bird-alone's ear: Stand close! they have gotten to horse, and will be coming our way. Nock an arrow. And even so did he.

Therewith they heard clearly the riding of men, and in less than five minutes' space they saw three big weaponed men riding together, clad in red surcoats, and they were so nigh that they heard the words of their speech. One said to the other: How long shall the knight hold out, think ye? Oh, a week maybe, said the other. Meseems it was scathe that we stayed not a while to pine him, said the first man. Nay, said the second, we be over-heavy laden with bed-gear to tarry. And they all laughed thereat, and so went on out of hearing.

But then came four on together, whereof one, a gaunt, oldish man, was saying: It is not so much how long we shall be getting there, but what shall betide when we get there. For this is not like lifting a herd of neat, whereof sharing is easy, but with this naked-skinned, two-legged cattle, which forsooth ye can eat and yet have, there may well be strife over the sharing. And look to it if it hath not begun already: we must needs dismount three of our best men that these white-skinned bitches forsooth may each have a horse to herself, or else would they be fighting as to which should have a damsel of them before him on the saddle: curse the fools!

Laughed out they who were about him, and one young man cast a jeer at him the meaning whereof they might not catch, and again they laughed; and

that deal passed on. And next came a bigger rout, a half score or so, and they also laughing and jeering; but amidst them, plain to see riding a-straddle, their ankles twisted together under the horses' bellies, their hands bound behind them, first Atra, black-clad as erst; then Aurea, in a gown of wheat-colour; then Viridis, green-clad. Atra rode upright, and looking straight before her; Aurea hung her head all she might, and her long red hair fell about her face; but Viridis had swooned, and was held up in the saddle by one of the caitiffs on each side of her. They were but little disarrayed, save that some felon had torn the bosom of Viridis' gown, and dragged down the cloth so that her left shoulder was bare.

Arthur looked, and drew at the caitiff who went afoot beside Atra, and Birdalone at him who went by Viridis, for she wotted whitherward Arthur's shaft would be turned. The loose of the two bows made but one sound; both men fell stark dead, and the others huddled together a moment, and then ran toward the thicket on either hand, and they who ran north, two of them saw not Arthur, because of his green armour, ere they felt the death which lay in his sword. And then he brake out amidst them, and there were three of them on him, yet for no long while, whereas their weapons bit not on the armour of the Faery, and his woodland blade sheared leather and ring-mail to the flesh and the bone: mighty were his strokes, and presently all three were wallowing on the earth.

Even therewith the seven who had passed on

had turned back and were come on him a-horseback; and hard had it gone with him, despite of his might and his valour and the trustiness of Habundia's mail. But meanwhile Birdalone had run to Viridis, who had fallen a dead weight aside of her horse, and lay half hanging by the bonds of her ankles. Birdalone swiftly cut the cords both of her feet and her hands, and drew her off her horse as best she might, and laid her down on the grass; and then ran to Arthur sword aloft, just as his new battle was at point to begin.

But as she ran it came into her mind in a twinkling that her sword would be but weak, and the horn hung about her neck. Then she stayed her feet, and set the horn to her lips and blew; and the oliphant gave forth a long singing note which was strange to hear. But while it was yet at her lips one of the caitiffs was upon her, and he cried out: Hah the witch, the accursed green witch! and fetched her a great stroke from his saddle, and smote her on the helm; and though his sword bit not on that good head-burg, she fell to the ground unwitting.

Yet was not the wood-wife's promise unavailing, for even while the voice of the horn was in the air, the way and thickets were alive with men-at-arms, green-clad as those twain, who straightway fell on the caitiffs, and with Arthur to help, left not one of them alive. Then went some to Viridis, and raised her up, and so dealt with her that she came to herself again; and the like they did by Birdalone, and she stood, and looked about confusedly, but yet saw this, that they had gotten the victory. Some

went withal to Aurea, and cut her bonds and took her off her horse and set her on the ground; and she was all bewildered, and knew not where she was.

But Arthur, when he saw Birdalone on her feet, and unhurt by seeming, went to Atra, and cut her bonds and loosed her, and set her on the earth, all without a word, and then stood before her shyly. Came the colour back into her face therewith, and she flushed red, for she knew him despite his outlandish green war-harness, and she reached out her hand to him, and he knelt before her and took her hand and kissed it. But she bent over him till her face was anigh his, and he lifted up his face and kissed her mouth. And she drew aback a little, but yet looked on him earnestly, and said: Thou hast saved my life, not from death indeed, but from a loathsome hell; I may well thank thee for that. And O, if my thanks might be fruitful to thee! And her bosom heaved, and the sobs came, and the tears began to run down her cheeks. And he hung his head before her. But in a while she left weeping, and turned about her face and looked round the field of deed; and she said: Who is yonder slim green warrior who hath even now knelt down by Viridis? Is it not a woman? Arthur reddened: Yea, said he; it is Birdalone. Thy love? she said. He said swiftly: Yea, and thy friend, and this time thy deliverer. So it is, she said. It is five years since I beheld her. My heart yearns for her; I shall rejoice at the meeting of us.

She was silent, and he also a while; then she said: But why tarry we here in idle talk when he is

yet bound, and in torment of body and soul; he the valiant, and the kind and the dear brother? Come, tarry for no question. And she stepped out swiftly along the green road going westward, and Arthur beside her; and as they went by Viridis, lo! Aurea had wandered unto them, and now was Birdalone unhelmed and kissing and comforting her. Then cried out Atra: Keep up thine heart, Viridis! for now we go to fetch thee thy man safe and sound.

So they went but a little way on the green road ere they came to Sir Hugh bound hard and fast to a tree-bole, and he naked in his shirt, and hard by lay the bodies of two stout carles with their throats cut; for these honest men and the two felons who had betrayed them were all the following wherewith the Green Knight had entered Evilshaw. And as it fell, the traitors had been set to watch while the others slept; and sleeping the caitiffs found them, and slew the said men-at-arms at once, but bound Hugh to a tree that he might be the longer a-dying; since none looked for any but their own folk to pass by that way. All this they heard afterwards of Hugh.

But now the said Hugh heard men going, and he opened his eyes, and saw Atra and a man-at-arms with her; and he cried out: Hah, what is this now, sister? a rescue? Yea, she said, and look thou on the face of the rescuer; and there is another hard by, and she is a woman.

Therewith was Arthur on him and cutting his bonds, and when he was loose they fell into each other's arms, and Hugh spake: Now then at last

doth life begin for me as I willed it! And hast thou my sweet she-fellow, Birdalone, with thee? Yea, said Arthur. How good is that! said Hugh. And yet, if it might but be that Baudoin were yet alive for us to seek! Then he laughed and said: These be but sorry garments wherewith to wend along with dear and fair ladies, brother! Nay, said Arthur, that may soon be amended, for yonder, where sword met sword, lieth raiment abundantly on the grass. Fie on it! said Hugh, laughing; shall I do on me the raiment of those lousy traitors? Not I, by the rood! Thou must seek further for my array, dear lad! So they all laughed, and were glad to laugh together. But Atra said: It is easier even than that, for thine own fair garments and weapons shall we find if we seek them. Sooth to say there was none left to bear them off, save it were this man, or Birdalone his mate.

With that word she looked kindly on Arthur, and again they laughed all three; though forsooth they were well-nigh weeping-ripe; one for joy, and that was Hugh; one for memory of the days gone by; and one for the bitterness of love that should never be rewarded; albeit dear even unto her was the meeting of friends and the glory of forgiveness and the end of enmity.

CHAPTER XXXIII. VIRIDIS TELLETH THE TALE OF THEIR SEEKING.

NOW came they back to where were the three others, and Viridis was quite come to herself and ran to meet her man, and he took her in his arms and caressed her sweetly; and then he turned to Birdalone, and spared no sign of friendly love to her; and Arthur, for his part, did so much for Aurea and Viridis. No long tale there was between them for that while, for they would busk them to be gone. But first they dug a grave for those two poor men who had been slain by the felons, and prayed for them. As for the caitiffs who lay slain there, one score and two of them, they left them for the wolves to devour, and the tearing of the kites and crows; nor meddled they with any of their gear or weapons. But they speedily found Hugh's raiment, and his pouch, wherein was money good store; and they found also rings and ouches and girdles, which had been torn from the damsels in the first rage of their taking.

First though, when they had gathered together such horses as they needed, and let the rest run wild, Birdalone brought her she-friends down into the dale, and did them to bathe in a pool of the stream, and tended them as if she were their tire-woman, so that they were mightily refreshed; and she made garlands for them of the woodland flowers, as eglantine and honeysuckle; and herself, she bathed her, and did not on her battle-gear again, but clad her body in her woman's array.

Then she brought forth victual and wine from Habundia's store, and set it out on the stream-side; and thereafter she went up the bent to the green way and fetched down Hugh and Arthur, and brought them to the ladies, and bade them note how trim and lovely they were gotten again, and again it could scarce be but that kisses and caresses were toward; and in all content and love they took their breakfast, though bitter-sweet unto Atra had been the holding of her hand by Arthur and the kissing of her cheek, albeit not for worlds had she foregone it.

So there they abode merrily for some three hours, whereas the day was yet young; and they asked and told each other much, so that the whole tale, both of the seekers from the world and of the seekers from the water-side, came out little by little. Now of the last ye have heard what there is to tell, but for the others Viridis took up the tale, as erst she did with the dealings of the Knights of the Quest in the Isle of Increase Unsought; and it seemed by her tale that Hugh and the ladies, though they were living happily and prosperously in the land of the Green Mountains, wherein Hugh had wealth enow, yet the thought both of Arthur and of Birdalone would not out of their minds, and often it was that they thought of them, not as friends think of friends of whom they are content to know that they are yet alive and most-like thriving, but as friends think of friends whose absence cuts a shard out of their lives, so that they long to see them day by day. Wherefore it came to this

at last, after much talk hereof, that Hugh left his possessions and his children (for he had two women-bairns born of Viridis) in the keeping of trusty folk, and took with him Viridis his wife, and Aurea and Atra, and they set out to seek those twain the world over till they should find them. And first by the rede of Atra they fared to Greenford, and there tarried a month, and sought tidings of many, and heard a word here and there whereby they deemed that Birdalone had passed therethrough some little time before. So they went thence to the Castle of the Quest, and found it in such plight as ye have heard, and it went sore to their hearts to behold it and to be there. But therewithal they happed upon Leonard the priest, and he was rejoiced beyond measure to see them, and told them all that ye have heard concerning Birdalone's coming thither and departing thence; and he told them therewith about those hauntings and sendings in the hall of the castle, and that they came to an end the very day that Birdalone departed thence in the Sending Boat. Yet for the last three days there had been visions therein; but being questioned he was loth to tell thereof, so they forbore him a while.

At these tidings they were sore moved, and they talked the matter over betwixt themselves (and Leonard also was in their redes), and they must needs deem that either Birdalone was cast away, or that she had come to her old dwelling, the House under the Wood, and belike had fallen into the hands of the witch once more, and thereat were they sore downcast; and yet somewhat it was, that

they had heard sure tidings of her; though meanwhile of Arthur had they heard nought.

While they talked this over, Atra, who had been somewhat silent, spake and said: Here are we brought to a stop with the first tidings which we have heard, whereas we know no manner of wending the Great Water. This seemeth evil, but let us not be cast down, or die redeless. Ye have heard of what sayeth Sir Leonard of these hauntings in the hall, and how that they have come back again, wherefore why should we not sleep in the hall this night, those of us at least who have not so much fear as not to note them well, to see if we may draw any avail from them? How say ye? For my part I will try the adventure, whatever may come of it.

Now they all yeasaid it, though Aurea was somewhat timorous, albeit she would not be parted from the others; so when night came there they made their beds and lay down; and the end of it was, that a little before midnight Atra waked the others, and did them to wit that by her deeming something was toward; and presently they were all four as wide awake as ever they were in their lives; and next, without any sound that was strange, there came the image of a woman on to the dais, clad in green like to an huntress of ancient days, her feet sandalled, her skirts gathered up into her girdle, so that her legs were naked; she had a quiver at her back, and a great bow in her hand.

Now to all of them save Atra this appearance seemed to be the image of Birdalone; but she told her fellows afterwards, that to her it seemed not

to be altogether Birdalone, but rather some other one most like unto her, as it were her twin-sister.

Gazed the image kindly and sweetly on them, so that they beheld it without fear; and it seemed to them that it gave forth speech; yet not so much that the sound of words was in the air about and smote their ears, as that the sense of words reached the minds of them. And this was the tale of it: Ye, who are seeking the lost, have done well to come hither, and now shall ye do well to wend the straightest way to the dwelling of the wild-wood, and that is by way of the western verge of Evilshaw the forest. Greenford is on the way. Wayleaders ye shall get; be wise, yet not prudent, and take them, though they be evil, and your luck may well avail.

Therewith the image vanished away as it had come, and Leonard, who with the others took the appearance for an image of Birdalone, said that it was such as he had seen it the three last days. So they lay not down again, but departed for Greenford without tarrying, and rode the other end of the short night through till they came to Greenford. But Leonard would not with them; and Hugh behight him, if he lived and did well, to come back somehow to the Castle of the Quest, and so re-do it that it should be no longer desolate.

So to Greenford they came, and spared not to do folk to wit that they would ride a pilgrimage in Evilshaw, and were fain of wayleaders; and there they dwelt a day or two, and many would let them of that journey, which, said they, was rather deadly

than perilous only. But on the third day came to Sir Hugh two stout carles well weaponed, who said that they knew well all the ways that led to Evilshaw, and the ways that went therethrough, and they offered themselves for a wage to Sir Hugh. Now these said carles were not over fair of favour, but seemed somewhat of ribalds, nor would Sir Hugh have taken them to service in his house at home; but he called to mind that it were more prudence than wisdom to spoil his journey and lose the occasion of finding his dear friends for the hasty judgment of a man's face and demeanour, wherefore he waged these two men, and they set out for the western edges of Evilshaw.

Many towns and thorps they passed through, and everywhere, when men knew whither they were bound, they letted them all they might in words; but little heed they paid thereto, whereas they were all fixed in their rede that nought was to be done save the finding of their friends, and that their life-days were spoiled if they found them not. And moreover, each one of them, but especially Atra and Viridis, had dreams of the night from time to time, wherein they seemed to see the green-clad woman, were she Birdalone or another, beckoning and bidding them to enter the Wood of Evilshaw.

As to those two way-leaders withal, whether it were that they got used to their faces, or that their ways and manners were nought uncourteous or fierce, they doubted them less and less as time wore; all save Viridis, whose flesh crept when they drew anigh her, as will betide one who comes across an

evil-looking creeping thing. As for Atra, she now began to heed little the things about her, as if her heart were wholly set on the end of the journey.

But now at last were they come so far that they had no choice but to use the said wayleaders, for they were gotten to the edge of Evilshaw. So they entered it, and those two led them by half-blind ways and paths amongst the thickets, and fumbled never with the road.

Five days they went thus, and on the fifth evening they lay down to sleep in the wood, and it was the turn of those two hirelings to keep watch and ward, and they woke not the next morn save with the hands of the Red Felons at their throats, so that Hugh was bound, and his two trusty men who came with him from the Green Mountains were slain before a stroke might be struck.

This was the end of Viridis' tale, save that she told how that it was she that had uttered those two shrieks which Arthur and Birdalone had heard from the thicket; and that she had so done when the two false wayleaders laid hold of her to drag her away from her man, who stood there before her bound to a tree that he might perish there, whereon the two caitiffs had smitten her into unwit that they might have no more of her cries.

Now when all this had been told, and they had abided awhile in the fair little dale, and had said many kind endearing words of friendship, they went up on the green way again, and took what of the horses they needed and trussed their goods thereon (and Birdalone would not leave that brave

armour which Habundia had given her), and they dight others for their home-riding, and the rest they turned loose into the woods, and so rode their ways, Birdalone going ever with Atra, and Arthur by Aurea; but Viridis must needs have Hugh within reach of her hand all the way.

Good speed they made, so that ere the night had fallen on them, though the sun was set, they had come to the House under the Wood; and there again was joy and wondering of the new-comers, and merry feasting on such simple victuals as were there, and good-night and rest in all contentment in the house where erst had Birdalone tholed so many griefs and fears.

Here ends the Sixth Part of the Water of the Wondrous Isles, which is called The Days of Absence, and begins the Seventh Part, which is called The Days of Returning.

THE WATER OF THE WONDROUS ISLES. THE SEVENTH PART: THE DAYS OF RETURNING.

CHAPTER I. SIR HUGH ASKETH BIRDALONE WHERE SHE WOULD HAVE THE ABODE OF THEIR FELLOWSHIP TO BE.

ON the next day, they arose and were glad, and it was to them as if the sun of the early summer had arisen for nought save to shine on their happy day. And they went about from place to place whereas tidings had befallen Birdalone; and she served them one and all as if she were their handmaid, and they loved her and caressed her, and had been fain to do all her will did they but know it.

In this wise wore day after day till June began to wane, and then on a time came Hugh unto Birdalone, and spake unto her and said: All we have been talking together, and I am sent to ask thee what is in thy mind as to abiding here or going elsewhither. For now that we be come together again, not for all the kingdoms of the world would we sunder again; and above all, none of us would leave thee, O my sister. But if thou wilt come with me to our land under the Green Mountains, there is for thee a pleasant place and a fair dwelling, and honour from all folk, and our love that shall never leave thee; and I, and Arthur my

brother, we shall win fame together amongst the knighthood, and thou shalt be proud and glad both of him and of me.

She said: And if I may not go with thee thither, what other way is there to escape the sundering? Said Hugh: This, that thou choose in the world what land liketh thee for a dwelling-place, and we will go with thee and leave thee never, and thou shalt be our lady and queen. Then he laughed and said: Yet, our lady, I have left behind me under the Green Mountains certain things which I love, as two fair women-children, and a squire or two whose fathers served my fathers, and whose children I would should serve my children. And moreover I have left there certain matters of avail, my wealth and livelihood to wit. Wilt thou begrudge it if I must needs go fetch these, and bring them to the land where thou dwellest, through whatever peril we may have to face?

Dear art thou, she said, and my very friend, but tell me: how sorry wouldst thou be to leave thine own land and follow after me for the sake of one who is neither thine own true love nor of thy kindred? Said he: Not so sorry that I should grudge against thee thereafter. Moreover if that much of sorrow came to me, I should deem it not ill, lest I grow so over-happy that the luck rise up against me and undo me.

She said, smiling on him kindly: Meseems that I am over-happy, whereas I have such dear cherishing of noble friends. But now I will tell thee all, and maybe thou wilt love me the less for the tell-

ing. In these woods here, and lady and mistress of them, dwelleth one who is not of the race of Adam. And she helped and cherished me and gave me wisdom when I was tormented and accursed, and she it was who saved me from the evil witch, and gave me the good hap to meet your loves and to fetch you to their helping; and twice hath she saved me from mortal peril otherwise. And she hath found me my love, thy brother Arthur, and delivered him from unwit and wanhope; and she it is who drew all you hither unto us, and who delivered you from the felons who had mastered you. And I have sworn unto her that I would never wholly sunder me from her; and how shall I break mine oath and grieve her, even had I the will thereto, as God wot I have not? And she wept therewith.

But Hugh kissed her and said: Birdalone, my dear, why weepest thou? Didst thou not hear my word, that thy people should be my people, and thy land my land, and that whither thou goest I will go? Dost thou not trow me then? Or how deemest thou I may tear thy friend Viridis from thee, when she hath just found thee? But tell me, hast thou in thy mind any dwelling-place other than this?

Yea, she said: I may not depart very far from this forest of Evilshaw lest I grieve my wisdom-mother overmuch. But if one go westward through the wood, he shall happen at last, when he cometh forth of it, on a good town hight Utterhay, which lieth on the very edge thereof. There was I born, and there also I look to find three dear and trusty

friends to whom I owe return of their much kindness. It is a noble town in a pleasant land, and thou and my lord Arthur may well win both honour and worship and lordship there. And wholly I trust in thy word that thou wilt not grudge against me for dragging thee thither.

Therewith she gave him her hand, smiling on him, though there was yet trouble in her face. But he took the hand and held it, and laughed merrily and said: Lo now! how good it is for friends to take counsel together! What better may we do than go with thee thither? And how greatly will Viridis rejoice when she heareth of this. Now will I go and tell her and the others.

Go then, dear lad, she said; but as to the matter of thy fetching thy children and livelihood hither, that may be not so hard nor so perilous as thou deemest; and thou shalt go about it whenso thou wilt, and the sooner the better, and we shall abide thee here as long as need may be. And therewith he went his ways to tell Viridis and the others of this rede which they had come to between them.

CHAPTER II. BIRDALONE TAKETH COUNSEL WITH HER WOOD-MOTHER CONCERNING THE MATTER OF SIR HUGH.

ON that same day went Birdalone to the Oak of Tryst and called her wood-mother to her, and she came glad and smiling, and kissed and embraced Birdalone, and said unto her: Now I see that thou art well content with this last matter I have done for thee, whereas thou art come to crave a new gift of me. How knowest thou that? said Birdalone, laughing. Said Habundia: Wouldst thou have come to me so soon otherwise from out of all that happiness? I have come to tell thee of my rede, said Birdalone, and to ask thee if thou art like-minded with me thereon. Said the wood-wife: And what is thy rede, my child? Wood-mother, said Birdalone, we deem that it were good for us all to go down into Utterhay where I was born, and to take up our abode therein.

Said the wood-wife: This rede I praise, and even so would I have counselled you to do; but I abided to see if it should come from out of thy breast, and now even so it hath done; wherefore I understand thy wisdom and rejoice in thee. And now crave thy boon, my child, and thou shalt have it without fail.

Yea, said Birdalone, that will I, and the more that it is a simple one and easy for thee to do. Thou knowest that Hugh the Green Knight hath come with my she-friends seeking us all the way

from under the Green Mountains, and he hath left there goods that he needs must have and folk whom he loves; and now he would go back thither, and fetch all that away hither, and see to his matters as soon as may be. And I would have thee counsel us what to do, whether to build a barque, as perchance we may get it done, and sail the lake therein to the Castle of the Quest or thereabout, and thence to ride to his land; or else to take thy guidance and safe-conduct through the wood, and to bring his folk back the same way.

Said the wood-wife: As to the way by water, I may help you little therein, and meseemeth that way be many traps and wiles and many perils. Wherefore I bid you try it not, but let the Green Knight come up hither to this tree to-morrow before noon, all horsed and armed and arrayed, and there shall he find three men armed in green gear, horsed well, and leading two sumpter-beasts with them; and they shall be his until he giveth them back unto me. But if he doubteth any thing betwixt the wood's end and under the Green Mountains, let him wage what folk he will besides, for these my men will have money enough of his with them. But by no means let him send them away till he hath done with the wood altogether, both betwixt here and the western dwelt-land, and here and Utterhay, save thou be with him. But while these be with him, both he and whatsoever money he bringeth shall be sure from all peril whiles they be in the wood. Now, my child, was not this the boon thou camest up hither to ask of me?

Yea verily, said Birdalone; yet also I came up hither to praise thee and thank thee and love thee. And she threw herself into Habundia's arms and kissed and caressed her, and Habundia her in like wise.

Spake the wood-wife: Thou art the beloved child of my wisdom; and now I see of thee that thou wilt be faithful and true and loving unto me unto the end. And I think I can see that thou and thy man shall do well and happily in Utterhay; and the Green Knight also and thy she-friends. And whatsoever thou wilt of me that I may do for thee or thy friends, ask it freely, and freely shalt thou have it. But this I will bid thee, that the while the Green Knight shall be gone about his matter, thou shalt come hither to me often; and thy friends also thou shalt bring to me, that I may see them and talk to them and love them. And specially shalt thou bid Atra unto me; for meseems she is so wise already that I may learn her more wisdom, and put that into her heart which may solace her and make her to cease from fretting her own heart, and from grief and longing overmuch. And I were fain to reward her in that she hath forborne to grudge against thee and to bear thee enmity. For I know, my child, not from mine own heart, but from the wisdom I have learned, how hardly the children of Adam may bear to have that which they love taken away from them by another, even if they themselves might in the long last have wearied of it and cast it away their own selves. Go now, my child, and do thy friend to wit what I will do for him.

Therewith they parted, and Birdalone fared home to the house, and found the fellowship of them all sitting by the brook-side, and talking sweetly together in all joy and hope of what their life should be in the new land whereto Birdalone would lead them. Straightway then she told them of Hugh and his journey, and how well he should be guarded in the wood both coming and going. And they thought that right good, and they thanked her and praised her, and took her into their talk, and she sat down by them happily.

CHAPTER III. OF THE JOURNEYING THROUGH THE FOREST OF EVILSHAW UNTO THE TOWN OF UTTERHAY.

ON the morrow in due time Birdalone, going afoot, led Sir Hugh, all-armed and horsed, to the Oak of Tryst, and there they found the three men-at-arms, well-weaponed and in green weed, abiding them. They did obeisance to Sir Hugh, and he greeted them, and then without more ado he kissed Birdalone and went his ways with his way-leaders, but Birdalone turned back to the house and her friends.

Next day Birdalone brought her three she-friends unto the Trysting Oak, and showed them to the wood-mother, and she was kind and soft with them; and both Aurea and Viridis were shy with her, and as if they feared her, but Atra was frank and free, and spake boldly. And thereafter when Birdalone went to meet her wood-mother, Atra would go with her if she were asked, and at last would go alone, when she found that Habundia was fain of her coming, so that there were not many days when they met not; and the wood-wife fell to learning her the lore of the earth, as she had done aforetime with Birdalone; and Atra waxed ruddier and merrier of countenance, whereof was Birdalone right glad, and Arthur yet more glad, and the others well content.

So wore the time till Hugh had been gone for twenty and three days, and as they walked the

meadows anigh the house about undern, they saw a knight riding down the bent toward them, and presently they knew him for Hugh, and turned and hastened to meet him, so that he was straightway amidst them, and on foot. Dear then were the greetings and caresses betwixt them, and when it was over, and Birdalone had led away his horse and dight it for him, and had gotten him victuals and drink, and they were all sitting on the grass together, he told them how he had fared. He had done all his matters in the Land under the Green Mountains, and had given over his lands and houses to a man of his lineage, his cousin, a good knight, and had taken from him of gold and goods what he would. Then he had taken his two bairns and their nurse, and an old squire and five sergeants, whereof one was his foster-brother, and the others men somewhat stricken in years, and had departed with them. Sithence he had come his ways to Greenford, and had held talk therein with the prior of a great and fair house of Black Canons, and had given him no little wealth wherewith to re-do the Castle of the Quest what was needed, and for livelihood of four canons to dwell there, and Leonard to be their prior, that there they might remember Sir Baudoin their dear friend daily in the office, and do good unto his soul. Sithence he had ridden to the Castle of the Quest with the said Prior of St. Austin of Greenford, and had found Leonard, and had settled all the business how it was to be done. Thereafter he had returned to Greenford, and gathered his folk, and got him gone, under the guidance of

Habundia's folk, by castles and thorps and towns the nearest way to the edge of Evilshaw. And they had come to the forest, and ridden it six days without mishap; and when they had come to the Oak of Tryst once more, the wayleaders said that it were well if all they together tarried not much longer in the forest; wherefore they had brought them to a fair wood-lawn, and there they encamped, and were there as now. And, said Hugh, there are they abiding me, and it is in my mind that this very eve we go, all of us, and meet them there, if ye may truss your goods in that while; but as to victuals, we have plenty, and it needeth not. And then to-morrow shall we wend our way as straight as may be toward the good town of Utterhay.

All they yeasaid it, though in her heart maybe Birdalone had been fain of abiding a little longer in her own land; but she spake no word thereof. And they all set to work to the trussing up of their goods, and then turned their backs on the Great Water, and came up into the woodland, and so to the camp in the wood-lawn. And there had Viridis a joyful meeting with her babes, and she gladdened the hearts of Sir Hugh's men-at-arms by her kind greeting; and they rejoiced in meeting Aurea and Atra again, and they wondered at Birdalone and her beauty, and their hearts went out to her, both the old men's and the young ones'. But Habundia's men looked on it all like images of warriors.

There then they feasted merrily that evening. But when the morrow was come they were speedily on the way toward Utterhay; and the wayleaders

guided them so well and wisely, that by noon of the fifth day they were come forth of the wood and on to the bent that looked down upon the town of Utterhay. There turned to Hugh the three wayleaders, and spake: Lord, we have done thee the service which we were bidden; if thou hast no further need of us, give us leave.

Said Hugh: Leave ye have, and I shall give you a great reward ere ye go. Said the chief of them: Nay, lord, no reward may we take, save a token from thee that thou art content with us. What token shall it be? said Hugh. Quoth the wayleader: That each of us kiss the Lady Birdalone on the mouth, for she it is that is verily our mistress under our great mistress.

Laughed Hugh thereat, but the men laughed not; then spake Hugh: This must be at the lady's own will. Even so, said they.

Then Hugh brought Birdalone thither and told her what was toward, and she consented to the kiss with a good will, and said to each of the men after they had kissed her: Herewith goeth my love to the mistress and queen of the woods; do ye bear the same unto her. And thereafter those wayleaders fared back into the woods.

Now they gather themselves together and go down toward Utterhay, and make a brave show, what with the sumpter-horses, and the goodly array of the four ladies, and the glittering war-gear of the men-at-arms; and Sir Hugh and Sir Arthur displayed their pennons as they went.

All this saw the warders on the wall of Utter-

hay; and they told the captain of the porte, and he came up on to the wall, and a man with him; and when he saw this bright company coming forth from the wood, he bade men to him, two score of them, all weaponed, and he did on his armour, and rode out-a-gates with them to meet those new-comers; and this he did, not because he did not see them to be but few, but because they came forth out of Evilshaw, and then doubted if they were trustworthy.

So he met them two bowshots from the gate, and rode forward till he was close to the wayfarers; and when he beheld the loveliness of the women, and especially of Birdalone, who wore that day the gleaming-glittering gown which Habundia had given her, he was abashed, and deemed yet more that he had to do with folk of the Faery. But he spake courteously, and said, turning to Hugh, who rode the foremost: Fair sir, would ye tell unto the man whose business it is to safeguard the good town of Utterhay what folk ye be, and on what errand ye ride, and how it is that ye come forth from Evilshaw safe, in good case, with pennons displayed, as if the said wood were your very own livelihood? For, sooth to say, hitherto we have found this, that all men dread Evilshaw, and none will enter it uncompelled.

Thereto answered Hugh: I hight Sir Hugh the Green Knight, and am come from under the Green Mountain; and this is Sir Arthur, called the Black Squire, but a knight he is verily, and of great kindred and a warrior most doughty. And he hath been

captain of the good town of Greenford west away through the wood yonder a long way, and hath done the town and the frank thereof mickle good service in scattering and destroying the evil companies of the Red Hold, which hold we took by force of arms from the felons who held it for the torment and plague of the country-side.

Now as to our errand, we be minded to dwell in your good town of Utterhay, and take our part with your folk, and we have wealth enow thereto, so as to be beholden to none; and as time goes on we may serve you in divers wise, and not least in this maybe, that with a good will we shall draw sword for your peace and the freedom of them of Utterhay.

When the captain heard these words, he made obeisance to Sir Hugh, and said: Fair sir, though we be here a long way from Greenford, yet have we heard some tale of the deeds of you, and surely the porte and all the folk shall be fain of your coming. Yet I pray thee be not wrath; for there is a custom of the good town, that none may enter its gates coming from out of this Forest of Evilshaw, save he leave some pledge or caution with me, be it his wealth, or the body of some friend or fellow, or, if nought else, his very own body. Wherefore if thou, Sir Green Knight, wilt but give us some sure pledge, then will I turn about and ride with you back and through the gate into Utterhay; and doubtless, when the mayor hath seen you and spoken with you, the said pledge shall be rendered to you again.

Ere Hugh might answer, came Birdalone forth and said: Sir captain, if I, who am the lady of the Black Squire here, be hostage good enough, then take me, and if need be, chain me to make surer of me. And she drew near unto him smiling, and held out her hands as if for the manacles.

But when the captain saw her thus, all the blood stirred in his body for joy of her beauty, and he might but just sit his horse for his wonder and longing; but he said: The saints forbid it, lady, that I should do thee any hurt or displeasure, or aught save the most worship I may. But thy hostage I will take, Sir Knight, if thou be content to yield her, whereas in an hour belike she shall be free again. And now fare we all gateward again.

So then they all rode on together, Birdalone by the captain's left hand; and as they passed by the poor houses without the wall, she looked and saw the one which had been her mother's dwelling, so oft and so closely had she told her all about it.

Thus then they entered Utterhay, and the captain led them straight to the mote-house whereas the mayor and the porte were sitting; and much people followed them through the streets, wondering at them, and praising the loveliness of the women, and the frank and gallant bearing of the men-at-arms.

So they lighted down at the mote-house and were brought to the mayor, and when he had spoken them but a little, and had come to himself again from the fear and abashment that he had of them, he showed himself full fain of their coming, and

bade them welcome to the good town, and took them into his own house to guesting, until folk might dight a very goodly house which the porte did give unto them.

But some two hours afterwards, when they were housed in all content, as they sat in the hall of the mayor, which was great and goodly, talking and devising with worthies of Utterhay, there entered two fair and frank-looking young men, who went straight up to Birdalone, and the first knelt down before her and kissed her hand, and said: O our lady, and art thou verily come to us! O our happiness and the joy of this day!

But when she saw him and heard him and felt the touch of his hand, she bent down to him and kissed him on the forehead, for she knew him that it was Robert Gerardson.

Then the other man came up to her as if he also would have knelt to her, but his purpose changed, and he cast his arms about her body and fell to kissing her face all over, weeping the while, and then he drew off and stood trembling before her; and she, all blushing like a red rose and laughing a little, and yet with the tears in her eyes, said: O Giles Gerardson, and thou, Robert, how fain I am to see you twain; but tell me, is your father well? Yea, verily, our dear lady, said Robert, and it will be unto him as a fresh draught of youth when he wotteth that thou art come to dwell amongst us; for so it is, O lady beloved, is it not? said he. Yea, forsooth, or even so I hope, said Birdalone. But here be other friends that ye must needs know,

if we come to dwell together here in peace; and then go and fetch me hither your father.

Therewith she presented them unto Arthur and Hugh and the three ladies of the Quest, and all they greeted them kindly and in all honour; and the Gerardsons loved and worshipped them, and especially the lovely ladies, the she-friends of their lady.

And whiles they were about this, in cometh old Gerard himself, and when Birdalone saw him at the door, she arose and ran to meet him, and cast her arms about him as if she were his own daughter; and most joyful was the meeting betwixt them.

CHAPTER IV. OF THE ABIDING IN UTTERHAY IN LOVE AND CONTENTMENT.

NOW when seven days were worn, the mayor made a great feast at his house, and thither were bidden all the men of the porte and other worthies, and great merchants who had come into their town; and the said feast was given in honour of these new-comers, and that day they sat on the dais, and all the guests worshipped them and wondered at their beauty; and nought was spoken of for many days save the glory and hope that there was in this lovely folk.

But the next day after the feast were they brought to their house in all triumph; and it was as fair as might be thought of, and there they dwelt a while in rest and peace, and great recourse there was there of Gerard and his sons.

But ere the winter was over, were Hugh and Arthur and Gerard and his sons taken to the freedom of Utterhay; and thereafter spake the chief men of the porte and the masters of the crafts unto the two knights by the mouth of the mayor; and he told them, what already they partly knew, that the good town had of late gotten many enemies, whereas it was wealthy and not very strong, and that now two such warriors having come amongst them, they were minded to strengthen themselves, if only they two would of their gentleness and meekness become their war-dukes to lead them against the foemen. But the two friends answered

that it was well their will to dwell there neighbourly, and do them all the help they might, and that they would not gainsay the worship they offered them nor the work that should go with it.

With that answer were all men well content and more: and then the mayor said that the mind of the porte it was to strengthen the walls and the gates, and to build a good and fair castle, meet for any earl, joining on to the wall by the face that looked west, that is to say, on to Evilshaw; and that liked the war-dukes well.

So when spring came it was set about, but it was five years adoing, and before it was all finished the war-dukes entered into it, and dwelt there with their wives and their friends in all honour. And a little thereafter, whether they would or no, the men of Utterhay had to handle weapons and fare afield to meet the foe with the valiant men of the crafts, and what of waged men they might get. And well and valiantly were they led by their dukes, and they came to their above, and gained both wealth and honour thereby; and from that time forward began the increase of Utterhay under those two captains, who were unto them as in old time the consuls had been unto the Roman folk, save that they changed them not year by year as the Romans were wont.

So wore the days, and all those friends dwelt together in harmony and joy; though the wearing of time wrought changes amongst them. For Robert Gerardson began in no long while to look on Aurea with eyes of love; and at last he came to Birdalone and craved her leave to woo the said

lady, and she granted it with a good will, and was fain thereof, whereas she saw that Aurea sorely lacked a mate; and scarce might she have a better than was Robert; so in process of time they two were wedded and dwelt together happily.

Forsooth Birdalone had been fainer yet might she have seen Giles Gerardson and Atra drawn together. But though they were dear friends and there was much converse betwixt them, this betid not, so far as we have heard.

The old Gerard dwelt happily amongst them all for fifteen years after they had come to Utterhay, and then fell asleep, a very old man.

As to the wood of Evilshaw, it was not once a year only that Birdalone and Arthur sought thither and met the wood-mother, but a half-score of times or more, might be, in the year's circle; and ever was she kind and loving with them, and they with her.

But of all those fellows it was Atra that had longest dealings with the wood-wife; for whiles would she leave Utterhay and her friends and fare lonesome up into Evilshaw, and find Habundia and abide with her in all kindness holden for a month or more. And ever a little before these departures betid would she fall moody and few-spoken, but she came back ever from the wood calm and kind and well-liking.

Amidst all these comings and goings somewhat wore off the terror of Evilshaw; yet never was it accounted other than a daring deed to enter it alone without fellowship; and most had liefer that some

man of religion were of their company therein, or they would bear about them something holy or blessed to hold the evil things.

Now when all this hath been said, we have no more to tell about this company of friends, the most of whom had once haunted the lands about the Water of the Wondrous Isles, save that their love never sundered, and that they lived without shame and died without fear. So here is an end.

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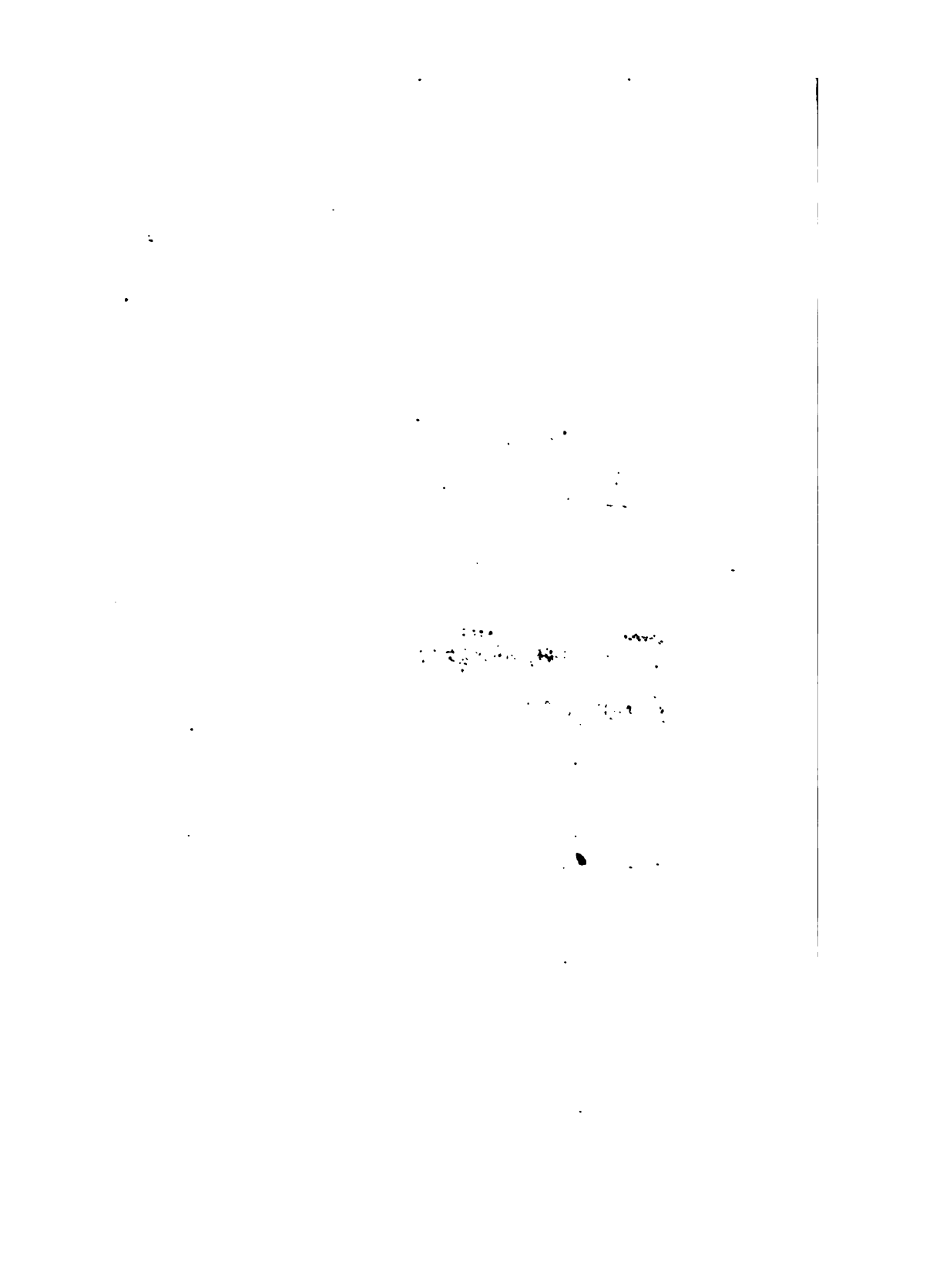

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